Sheila Finch: The Naked Face of God

# Fantasy & Science Fiction

JUNE

$2.99 US • CANADA $3.79

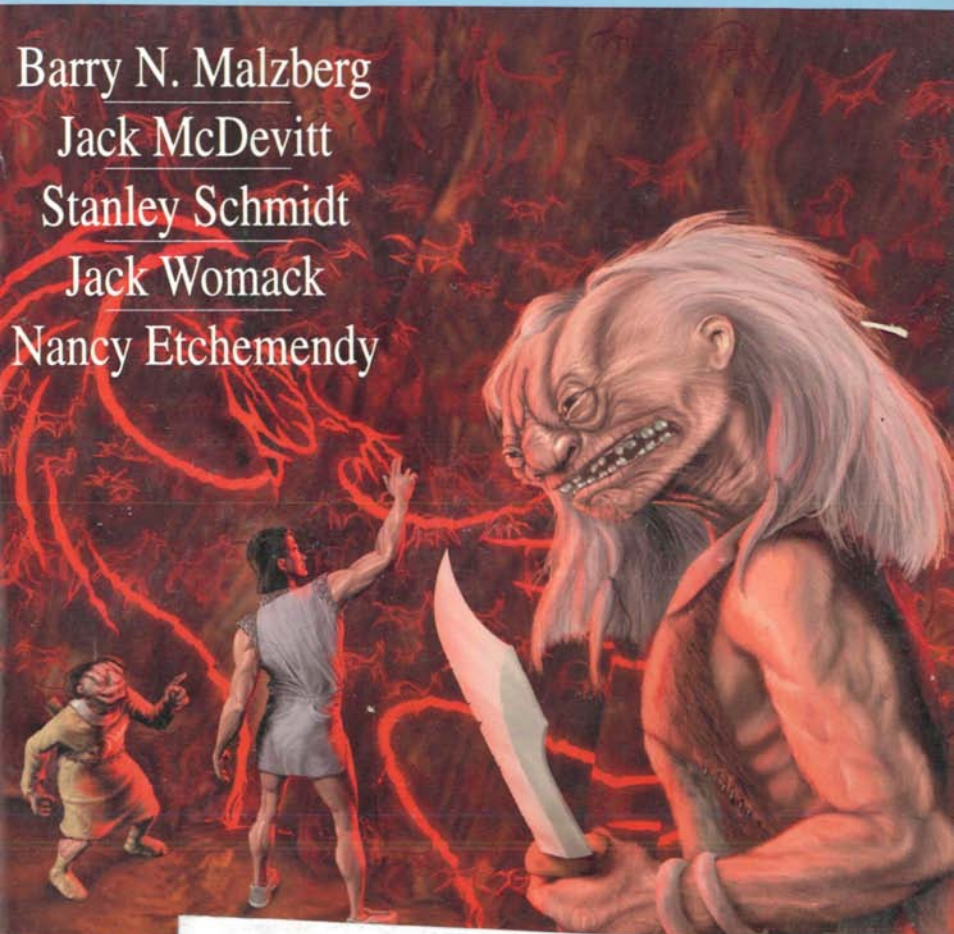
Barry N. Malzberg

Jack McDevitt

Stanley Schmidt

Jack Womack

Nancy Etchemendy



DISPLAY UNTIL JUNE

#BXNBTBK********** 3-DIGIT 973
#JHN0532F098 9#630548

ELEANOR JOHNSON
532 FERRY ST SW
ALBANY OR 97321-2

71486 58370 7

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

# Worlds of wonder - only $25.97
# Subscribe now and save 25%

For about the price of a hard cover book, we'll send over 1800 pages of compelling fiction your way, stories by both superstar and rising-star writers, along with lively departments on Science, Books and Films. Your subscription will include a special double anniversary issue, which alone has over 100,000 words of new short stories and novellas.

❑ **Send me a full year of *Fantasy & Science Fiction* at the special rate of $25.97. I save $8.52 off the newsstand price**

Name _____ ❑ Payment enclosed ❑ Bill me

Address_____ ❑ Charge my MC / Visa

City _____

St/Zip_____ Acct No._____

Outside the US add $5 postage. Make checks payable in US dollars drawn on a US bank. Exp. date _____

Allow 6 weeks for delivery of first issue. ❑ New ❑ Renewal

We publish 11 issues a year, including a double Oct/Nov anniversary issue. 586R3

**Fantasy & Science Fiction, 143 Cream Hill Rd., West Cornwall, CT 06796**

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE MAGAZINE OF

# Fantasy&ScienceFiction

June• 49th Year of Publication

## NOVELETS

GOOD INTENTIONS 6 Jack McDevitt and Stanley Schmidt

DOUBLE SILVER TRUTH 137 Nancy Etchemendy

## SHORT STORIES

A PRISONER OF HISTORY 48 Robert C. Taylor

THE BUILDING 64 Herbert W. Franke

CHRYSOBERYL 67 Mary A. Turzillo

JOB'S PARTNER 83 Batya S. Yasgur and Barry N. Malzberg

THE NAKED FACE OF GOD 93 Sheila Finch

MONOGAMY 121 William R. Eakin

## DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS TO LOOK FOR 35 Charles de Lint

BOOKS 39 Robert K.J. Killheffer

COMING ATTRACTIONS 63

SCIENCE: MESSING WITH YOUR MIND 112 Pat Murphy and Paul Doherty

CURIOSITIES 162 Jack Womack

CARTOONS: Henry Martin (82), S. Harris (120, 163)

COVER BY MICHAEL DASHOW FOR "THE NAKED FACE OF GOD"

EDWARD L. FERMAN, Publisher — GORDON VAN GELDER, Editor
CHERYL CASS, Circulation Manager — AUDREY FERMAN, Assistant Publisher
ROBIN O'CONNOR, Assistant Editor — HARLAN ELLISON, Film Editor

The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction (ISSN 1095-8258), Volume 94, No. 6, Whole No. 563, June 1998. Published monthly except for a combined October/November issue by Mercury Press, Inc. at $2.99 per copy. Annual subscription $33.97; $38.97 outside of the U.S. (Canadian subscribers: please remit in U.S. dollars.) Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy & Science Fiction, 143 Cream Hill Rd., West Cornwall, CT 06796. Publication office, 143 Cream Hill Rd., West Cornwall, CT 06796. Periodical postage paid at West Cornwall, CT 06796, and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A. Copyright © 1998 by Mercury Press, Inc. All rights, including translations into other languages, reserved.

GENERAL OFFICE: 143 CREAM HILL RD., WEST CORNWALL, CT 06796
EDITORIAL OFFICE: PO BOX 1806, MADISON SQUARE STATION, NEW YORK, NY 10159
www.fsfmag.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

# EDITORIAL

## GORDON VAN GELDER

### THE PAST

NEARLY twenty years ago, the Supreme Court handed down the Thor Power Tools decision. The ruling, as best as I understand it, altered the way in which companies account their unsold goods at tax time. Inventory values could no longer be "written down," which meant that slow-selling items were taxed more heavily and thus weren't as profitable.

I do not know how this ruling affected the power tool business, but it changed the publishing industry. Book companies could no longer afford to keep in print titles that sold slowly over time. Mass-market paperbacks (your typical pocket-sized book) were hit particularly hard, since they were sold through a returnable system that calls for two-to-three books to be printed for every one or two sold.

Backlist books were devastated. Among those hit hardest were the odd ones, the literary sports, the unusual and non-commodifiable works, the novels by writers who only wrote a book or two, the books that required time and word-of-mouth attention in order to develop a following. They no longer had time.

### THE PRESENT

I have not seen figures, but I would guess that the average life in print for a mass-market paperback novel is ten or eleven months.[1] A hardcover's life ranges from nine months to two years on average. Trade paperbacks have become the refuge for backlist titles; I'd guess the average trade paperback stays in print two or three years.

[1]Perhaps it's even longer now — the instances when the Philip K. Dick Award for best original paperback has been presented to a book that has already gone out of print have diminished in recent years.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

What stays in print? Not much. Many classics from before 1980 are in print — *Foundation, Farenheit 451, The Left Hand of Darkness,* and *Childhood's End* are all available, as is the more recent *Neuromancer.* But it's harder to determine "classics" without the benefit of time, and among newer books, damn few of the best from the past fifteen years are currently available. Try looking up your favorite writers in *Books in Print* and you'll find a lot of omissions.

### The Future

Here's the way I see it: print-on-demand publishing will change everything. On-line booksellers and download depots will make backlist books available again. You'll be able to request the title you want, they'll download it for a fee (so writers will get their royalties), print it out in a recyclable edition, and ship your book to you.

Books will still be printed in more durable editions — the recycleback won't supplant the hardcover any more than did the mass-market paperback. And there are plenty of other associated questions and issues for which I can't envision an answer now (questions of distribution, promotion, production, and accounting), but my main point is this: I think we're headed toward a day when backlist books will be readily available, when book one in a series will actually be accessible when book three comes out, when you'll actually be able to read that great book your father or mother remembers so fondly.

### The Past, Again

While that day's not here yet, we've got to rely on libraries and used book stores (god love 'em!) for those good old books. In order to celebrate those gems, we're replacing Mike Resnick's "Forgotten Treasures" column with a regular feature to close out each issue. "Curiosities" will revisit each month something from this field's past, perhaps an obscure or curious tome of forgotten lore, perhaps a new insight into an old favorite. We hope you'll find them interesting.

—GVG

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

*Jack McDevitt is the author of such novels as* Ancient Shores *and most recently,* Moonbase. *Stan Schmidt is the longtime editor of* Analog *magazine. A couple of years ago, they were advisors at a unique program held near Syracuse every summer: The Asimov Seminar. Their experience resembles the events portrayed in this story, but sometimes truth is stranger than fiction, and sometimes fiction is stranger than truth...*

# Good Intentions

## *By Jack McDevitt & Stanley Schmidt*

"DO YOU BELIEVE IN UFOS?"

No, dammit. I don't believe in anything that hasn't been parked in my driveway so I could kick the tires and check the gearshift. So don't ask again. Just because I'm a science fiction writer doesn't mean I'm demented. I have no time for crop circles, telepathy, alien abductions, power centers, spontaneous combustion, or ancient astronauts. Loch Ness is empty, Atlantis is bunk, and I'll sleep in any haunted house in the world for five hundred bucks plus expenses. Okay?

I mention this up front because I attended a seminar this past summer during which I may have touched the infinite. And I know how that sounds. But I want to avoid your saying well, after all this is Jake Cobblemere, he writes all those stories about time travelers and rubber dimensions, so what do you expect? If you want to believe I've lost it, that's okay; but don't conclude all this just bubbled up out of my workday habits. Because that isn't what happened.

Not at all.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Last spring I got a call from Sam Wynn inviting me to participate as an advisor at the Baranov Seminar, which is conducted annually at the Skyhawk Conference Center in upstate New York. You might have heard of it. The participants refer to themselves as Baranovians. They're science fiction enthusiasts who meet for a few days every summer to renew old acquaintances and do the SF equivalent of a mystery weekend. They bring in a writer and maybe an outside expert to put together a simulation for them. The previous summer, for example, they converted Skyhawk into Moonbase and staged a murder. One of the guests was the New York City medical examiner. (The murderer, by the way, turned out to be the computer, *à la* Hal.)

The seminars have been running since 1971, when Abraham Baranov personally launched them, discovered how engaging they were, and stayed with them until his death. It was, I need not tell you, a signal honor to be asked to step briefly into the great man's shoes.

"This year they want to do a Martian dig," Sam told me. He explained that the group decides each summer what sort of program they'll do the following year. "We've got Marsbase up and running. We've been there for a while, taking soil samples and whatnot, and we discover some artifacts."

"Artifacts?" I said. "What sort of artifacts?"

"That's up to you, Jake."

"But Mars is dead. Has been for a couple of billion years, except maybe for the microbes. How could there be artifacts?"

"Your problem, Jake. Come up with something. And listen, we're giving you a professional archaeologist to work with."

"Okay," I said, warming to the idea. "Does the archaeologist write science fiction?"

"She doesn't like science fiction. But she's a friend of mine, she's available, and she offered to come no charge."

"What am I supposed to do with an archaeologist?"

"They want to do an actual dig. She knows how."

"I thought this would be a simulation."

"Oh, no. There'll be a real dig site. We've set aside some ground. You're going to bury the artifacts, and the team will dig them up and try to solve the mystery."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What mystery?"

"Invent one."

The archaeologist was Maureen Coverdale. She worked out of Penn, and I lived in Indianapolis, so we did all the planning on-line. She surprised me. I guess I'd expected that she would treat the whole thing more or less as an excuse to get a free vacation, but she took it all very seriously. She kept after me, pointing out that Martian artifacts could not be produced at the last minute, and that we had a clear obligation to make sure the Baranovians got their money's worth.

She turned out to be twenty years younger than I'd expected, dark-eyed, trim, a woman who looked as if she'd be more at home among soft blue lights than digging up broken pots. But I dreamed up a story line and we agreed on what we needed to do. She took charge of manufacturing the stuff we needed. She showed up two days before the program was to start, supervised the Skyhawk earthmover, buried everything, and was waiting (with Sam Wynn) to shake my hand when I arrived late, having underestimated the driving time on a series of winding roads.

We retired to The Hawk's Nest and reviewed our plans over rum and Coke. Then we walked out to the dig site, which was located about a quarter mile from Harper Hall. (Harper would serve as the team's mobile field station.) The site was about sixteen feet on a side, shielded by a canvas awning.

"Are the Baranovians here yet?" I asked.

"Some are," said Sam. "Most of them will straggle in during the night." He consulted a clipboard. "Altogether, we'll have twenty-four."

Skyhawk is located in deep forest on the shores of a glacial lake. Green-carpeted mountains rise on all sides. On that first night there was a brilliant full moon, the wind was loud in the spruce, and the woods smelled of mint and cold water. A half-dozen lights lined the far shore. Nothing could have been farther from Mars.

*Warren Hatch was glad to get off his hands and knees, and give his place to Judy Conroy. "I never knew archaeology was so mind-numbing," he told Maureen. A dozen or so members of the team were working meticulously over the site, removing the crumbly Martian soil a half-inch*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

*at a time, brushing it off rocks, turning it over to others who strained it to ensure nothing was being overlooked. "Whatever happened to Indiana Jones?" he asked. "To buried temples? Secret doors? That sort of thing?"*

*Maureen smiled. "Real archaeology would make a slow movie," she said.*

*Warren looked out past the dig site, through the plasteel shell that shielded them from the near-vacuum. Low red hills rose in the north, and he could see a dune buggy moving across the horizon.*

*"Got something here." Patti Kubik's voice. She brushed the object and held it up. It was a knife. Long and slightly curved, it had a metal blade and handle, and was still in good condition.*

*"No telling how old it is," said Cobblemere. "It could have been in the ground for centuries without showing any real deterioration."*

*They noted where the knife had been found, recorded the coordinates on a chart, and placed it beside the two urns they'd recovered earlier.*

*"Here. Look at this." Eddie Edwards, short, squat, barrel-shaped, bent close to the ground. He was on his knees, rear end stuck up, face red with effort, working with brush and fingers to clear a rectangular tablet about the size of a dinner plate. "It's got a picture on it," he said. That brought a crowd.*

*The tablet depicted a vaguely reptilian-looking creature with long teeth and crocodilian eyes. The stuff of bad science fiction films. For all that, it maintained an aspect that seemed almost pious. It wore a robe, and it seemed to have just dropped an object that might have been a stone or a crumpled piece of paper. A jagged line resembling a lightning bolt was drawn through the dropped object. A string of exotic characters lined the top and right side of the tablet.*

*"This can't be right," said Jason Kelly, the team's senior member in terms of age and service. Kelly was almost seventy, but he was a physical fitness freak and he could probably have run most of his associates into the ground. He claimed to be the world's lone exobiologist. "It's a hoax. Has to be."*

*"Why?" asked Warren.*

*"If this is supposed to be a Martian, it's all wrong. Martians couldn't*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

*possibly look like this. These creatures would have evolved in a swampy environment."*

*"Here's another." Murray Fineberg, this time. Murray was middle-aged, overweight, a man who looked as if he would have been more at home running a publishing business than kneeling in Martian silt. His tablet revealed the same sort of crocodilian creature, this time bowing before a pyramid from which lines of light seemed to emanate.*

*"It just doesn't figure," said Jason. "We know surface conditions were never adequate to support anything more complicated than a bacterium."*

*"Then why," asked Patti Kubik, "are we out here in the first place?" Patti was middle-aged, prematurely gray, possibly the most personable individual on Mars. Among a group of people who considered one another egomaniacs, she managed to maintain a good-humored humility. "We're all idiots much of the time," she'd told Warren once. "If you recognize that, it explains a lot."*

*Sam Wynn was wearing a headset. He was tall, thoughtful, deliberate, dressed in an ivory-colored jacket with an Oakland Raiders logo. His brows drew suddenly together and he pressed both earphones. After a moment he nodded and then called for attention. "I've got some news," he said. "The Delta team just found two metal disks on the North Ridge. They're approximately five meters in diameter, and they're mounted on cradles that permit both lateral and horizontal movement."*

*"Sounds like satellite dishes," said Bryan Trahan. Bryan was among the younger members of the team. He was in his early twenties, a seven-footer, quiet, ungainly, with clear handsome features and bright green eyes.*

*"That's what Clancey thinks," said Sam. Clancey was the leader of Delta team.*

*"So where are the satellites?" asked Patti.*

*"Negative," said Sam. "No satellites. We know that for a fact."*

*Eddie pushed his thick fingers into the soil and nodded to himself. "Another tablet," he said.*

*There was more: pots, cups, primitive tools. More tablets. Beads. Jewelry. A paperweight-sized pyramid that might have been made of diamond. (The diamond, if indeed that's what it was, had a scarlet tinge*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

*in its depths.) And a long metallic rod with markings, not unlike a gauge. They also dug up a strip of cable that appeared to be made of plastic. Odd.*

*At the edge of the excavation, they found the remains of a wall. The wall was a high-tech alloy, and must once have enclosed the site, even as their own plasteel dome now sealed it off.*

*Sam was listening to his earphones again. He was frowning. "Okay," he said into the mike. "We've got something else." He raised his voice so all could hear. "CNN reports that somebody blew up Union Station in Chicago. During rush hour. They've got several hundred dead. Almost a thousand people hurt." It was the latest in a wave of terrorist attacks by all kinds of disgruntled groups. Anybody with a grudge and enough money to buy a bombmaker could now make his irritation felt.* (His *was the correct usage, because to date no women had been charged.)*

*"Mars is starting to look good." Judy Conroy was from Chicago. She was diminutive, with classic features and dark brown hair, cropped in a pageboy. Her blue eyes, which were usually bright and penetrating, smoldered.*

*"Crazies everywhere," said Warren. Two weeks earlier, one group had bombed a nuclear power plant upwind of New York City in an unsuccessful effort to cause a meltdown.*

*"What's this?" asked Murray. He was brushing soil away from a long, smooth stone surface.*

*"Careful," said Maureen.*

*It was roughly one by three meters. Maureen took over direction, and within an hour they'd uncovered a table with a solid base about a meter and a half deep.*

*"You know what it looks like?" said Bryan.*

*"Yeah." Murray rubbed his hand across his balding scalp. "It looks like an altar."*

*Warren knelt down to examine it. It was stained.*

"I think we're off to a good start," said Maureen. She sliced a strip off her steak, tasted it, and nodded her approval. We'd secured a corner table, away from the Baranovians. Down on the beach, a few die-hard bathers were still in the water, even though the evening was turning cool.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"We should be," I said. Her artifacts had been damned good. "How long did it take you to bury the stuff?"

She looked out across the open field at the awning that marked the dig site. The ground was muddy. Unfortunately, the dome that held back the Martian vacuum could not keep out a terrestrial rainstorm. They'd all got drenched, and some had even retreated back to the dining hall or their individual quarters. (An outdoor wedding had also taken a hit that afternoon.) But a half-dozen of the hardier Baranovians had hung on, cutting down through the soil until the urns and tools and gadgets had been recovered and recorded. And until the altar lay exposed.

There'd been visitors. Neighbors of Skyhawk, and guests from the wedding party, all curious as to why these people were digging a large hole in the lawn, had gathered outside the perimeter. Sam had set himself to intercept them, to keep them at a distance. He'd answered their questions as best he could. Some had seemed interested; others had smiled and retreated.

"The blood on the altar," Sam said. "That's a great idea. Where are we going with this?"

Only Maureen and I knew the scenario. "You think it's blood?" I asked innocently.

"Sure," he said. "What else? I've seen your work, Jake. You never miss a chance to spill blood."

I was hurt by the comment, and I was trying to think how to respond when Bryan joined us. His plate was heaped high with roast beef and mashed potatoes. "Interesting afternoon," he said from his height up near the ceiling. "Do you expect we'll be able to finish with the dig tomorrow?"

Maureen was slow to respond, and it occurred to me she liked Bryan. She was trying not to show it, but her eyes grew luminous and her color changed. "Yes," she said finally. "If we were doing this in realtime, this kind of excavation might take weeks. But we'll wrap it up about noon."

"Then what?"

She glanced at me. "Then," I said, "we'll withdraw into the field station and try to see what we have."

Bryan was wearing a T-shirt with a silhouette of Abraham Baranov, the dates of the seminar, and the motto *Mars or Bust*. Several of the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

participants had them by now. He nodded, tried the roast beef, stirred some sweetener into his iced tea, and buttered a roll. "When do we get to the AI?" he asked.

Startled, I looked suspiciously at Maureen. She shook her head no. She hadn't told him. But nobody else knew the scenario.

"Bryan, what makes you think there's an AI?"

"Well," he said, "I don't see where else you could go with all this. Anyway, I've read your work." He shrugged.

I was insulted again. But I hid my feelings behind a casual smile. "There are all kinds of possibilities," I said.

When Maureen and I were alone again, a half hour later, she let her dismay show. "What do we do?" she asked.

I'd been thinking about little else. "It's too late to change the scenario. We'll stay with it."

But I didn't sleep well that night. Sam had suggested I was predictable. Bryan had demonstrated it.

*The field station consisted of dormitory-style sleeping quarters for eight, a lab, a maintenance shack, a kitchen and dining room, a communication center, and a rec room. Additional support modules had been established outside. Their domes gleamed in the ruddy sunlight.*

*In the morning, there was fresh news: preliminary analysis of the North Ridge disks suggested they had been electrically powered. Two more had been found; and they were all in a straight line, approximately fifty meters apart.*

*Sam, manning the radio console, picked up a series of UPI Worldline bulletins that suggested the Earthside situation was deteriorating. President Martin had declared a national emergency, promised a war on terrorists, and mobilized the entire array of federal agencies in the effort. In a related development, the Congress passed a joint resolution calling for a mandatory death penalty for anyone convicted of a terror crime, or for any accessories in a terror crime. The President, vacationing at the Tampa White House, was quoted as saying he might consider calling for a suspension of habeas corpus until calm had been restored.*

*That all seemed far away. Warren thought how well distance lends*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

*perspective. The home world was a violent, angry place. And somehow, against the eternally placid stars, its virulence was more apparent. And less real.*

*Meantime, the team had spent the morning at the site, where they'd unearthed several more tablets, some with images, some without. All had inscriptions. The characters were unlike anything Warren had seen before, little more than squiggles and dots. But Judy said she thought they had enough to attempt a translation.*

*"How do we even begin?" asked Warren.*

*"Actually," she said, "it might be fairly easy. We should be able to assume the text is connected to the images. So first we try to figure out what the images are about."*

*There were eleven tablets. Eight had images; all had inscriptions. The reptilian figure was portrayed in various poses: it gazed contemplatively past the observer's shoulder; it walked casually through a corridor; it drank from a flagon, through which a lightning strike passed; it even leaned casually against a wall, as if waiting for a bus. (In the latter depiction, the lightning was again present, this time a bolt drawn diagonally across the lizard itself.)*

*"Hey," said Sam, pulling his earphones down around his neck. "They took out the Holland Tunnel."*

*"Blew it up?"*

*"Yeah. During rush hour. They've got a couple thousand casualties."*

*They stood around for a time in stunned silence, the curious Martians forgotten. "I wonder," said Jason, "if they ever knew what kind of neighbors they had."*

*A half hour later, Sam announced that a lab report had come back on the altar stains. "There's DNA," he said, "and plasma, oxygen, fructose, proteins, urea — "*

*"Blood," said Patti.*

*Sam shook his head. "They're saying there are some differences, but it's a decent approximation."*

*Meantime, Murray thought he had the meaning of one of the tablets — the one with the creature leaning against the wall.* "No loitering," *he said. "And this one,* no littering."

*Somebody laughed. Snorted. But every image with a lightning bolt*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

*contained the same cluster of characters at the beginning.* Do not — ? *Warren knew instinctively that Murray was right. But he was disappointed that the first other-worldly translation would be so prosaic.* No littering. *My God.*

*Toward the end of the afternoon, they heard that Congress had voted President Martin broad emergency powers.*

*They worked through dinner, reading increasingly ominous bulletins, which Sam was now posting. The FBI were rounding up suspects. The National Guard had been placed on standby. The President, promising action against "cowards," made good on his threat to suspend habeas corpus. The ACLU warned against overreacting.*

*Meantime, Mars Central reported that the North Ridge disks had moved! Three had rotated and now seemed to be tracking the sun. (The fourth was apparently not functional.) Warren had just begun to digest the implications when another bulletin arrived: electrical power was being collected by the disks and relayed below ground.*

*"What's down there?" asked Judy.*

*"They've finally got around to ordering a radar survey," said Sam, pressing one earphone down.*

*Murray's team produced an alphabet for the alien script, and constructed a model syntax. Warren worked with them for a while, but they were too quick for him. Anyway, there was something else he wanted to look at.*

*"This," he told Judy, indicating the pyramid tablet. "The pyramid has to be something special. It puts off light rays. And look at the Martian's attitude."*

*"It's almost religious," she said. Judy's group had been cataloging and analyzing the other artifacts.*

*"That might be a leap," said Bryan. "After all, these are alien icons. I think we should go slow trying to read nonverbal cues."*

*Judy picked up the pyramid and compared it to the one in the image. "It's the same object."*

*"I think you're right," said Warren.*

*She held it at eye level and stared at it. "What are you?" she asked.*

It was getting late. "We'll pick it up from there tomorrow," I told

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

them. "But I want to congratulate you. We didn't think anybody was going to be able to translate the language."

Murray drummed his fingers on the table and glanced around at the five people who had been working with him on the tablets. "We thought we'd stay on awhile," he said. "We're close to a breakthrough."

But I didn't want anyone getting ahead of the program. "Let it go, folks. We'll get back at it in the morning."

They grumbled and picked up some notes and I knew damned well they were going to find a place and keep working. But I wasn't brought in to police these people, and they couldn't take the tablets with them, so there was a limit to how much progress they could make.

Skyhawk maintained The Hawk's Nest, a bar and recreation lounge next door to Harper Hall, which filled quickly with the Baranovians. They drifted by and talked about books they'd recently read, or about recent advances in one area or another, or just how good (or poor) the drinks were. They made it a point to avoid talking about the exercise with us. "It's not considered kosher," Sam said. "Not after hours." I wondered how *Bryan* had missed it.

After a while Maureen and I withdrew to talk about the next day's scenario.

I have to make a confession of sorts here. Maureen had caught my eye right at the start. By the end of the second day I felt positioned to try to implement some dishonorable intentions, so when she started toward the office we'd been using in the Long Elm Building, I steered us instead toward the lakefront.

She looked surprised but said nothing. We congratulated each other on the good job we were doing. The wind was loud in the trees and somewhere a radio was playing. Exactly the right sort of music for a moonlit night and a beautiful woman. "You have lovely eyes, Maureen," I told her.

Her lips curved into a smile. "I thought science fiction writers were above this sort of thing."

The comment threw me off stride. The truth was that I couldn't even *see* her eyes in the shadows. I struggled to come up with an appropriate response. Something witty. If you can make a woman laugh, I'd always noticed, everything else becomes a lot easier. But she'd turned away from

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

me and was looking out toward the lake. Along the shoreline, there were a couple of docks and a boathouse and a few benches. Someone was sitting on one of the benches.

"It's Bryan," she said. "What's he doing out there by himself?"

I shrugged. "I guess he wants some time alone."

"I guess," she said. "But the whole point of coming here's to party, isn't it? Especially for a guy his age."

There was something disconsolate in his appearance, a distortion in the geometry of body to bench to moonlight. I could see that Maureen felt it too, and a cold wind blew suddenly off the lake. We looked at one another, and I read the unasked question in her face, whether we should go over; and I saw the answer in her eyes. If he wanted company he'd be in the Nest. Best let it be.

We passed on, chilled, and strolled among the bungalows that served as living quarters. Gradually we got back to laying plans for the morning. The mood of the evening had changed, and I knew that an advance on my part would not be welcomed.

An hour later, we returned past the shore front. Bryan was still there.

*Four characters had been written across the face of the flip chart. "It's the god's name," said Murray. "It's from the tablet with the pyramid."*

*"What does the inscription say?" asked Judy.*

*"'In [the god's name] are all things made possible. Speak, and he will reply.'" There was of course no way to know how the name had been pronounced, or indeed how any of the Martian language had sounded.*

*"We have two kinds of inscriptions," Murray explained. "One set advises visitors about behavior. No loud talking. No shouting or laughing. That sort of thing. The other's devotional. 'Know that in the hour of most peril I am with you.'"*

*Warren was puzzled. "So we have a society in a place where no one could have lived during the last three billion years or so. Some of the artifacts, drums, religious symbols, and whatnot, seem primitive. But they were able to put up solar power units." It gave him a headache. "How long has this stuff been here? Have we established that?" He looked toward Sam.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

*Sam nodded. "The lab thinks the altar, the urns, the more primitive stuff, is about eleven thousand years old. The cable, the coils, the pyramid, one item that seems to be a gauge, are all* older. *By about a thousand years."*

*"Older?" said Eddie.*

*"Yes. The high-tech equipment came first." Sam paused. "This is off the subject, but it's something you should know. During the night, a lot happened back home. We have reports of widespread arrests across the United States. They've got massive riots, and the rioters are on both sides of the issue. The National Guard was called out, and in some places they refused to fire on the rioters. Martin's expected to declare a national emergency and there's even talk of his suspending the Constitution. On top of all that, Broadwell says he's not doing enough."*

*"Broadwell?" asked Judy.*

*"Chairman of the Joint Chiefs," said Bryan.*

*They stared at one another. Warren thought about his kids, four of them, all in their twenties and trying to get started. He didn't like what he was hearing. "I need to get to the commcenter," he said.*

*Sam nodded. "We're making provisions for anyone who wants to call home. Make a list of people you're worried about and we'll try to get through. But Harvey asked me to tell you that lines are jammed in some places and down in others so he can't promise anything."*

*"Best thing for us," said Jason, "is to just continue what we're doing and let things play themselves out. There's nothing we can do from here."*

*Sam touched one earphone, the way he always did when a message was coming in. A moment later he nodded and punched a button to activate the speakers.*

*" — and gentlemen." It was the Director. His voice, usually rich and full and authoritarian, sounded shaky. "I have to announce," he said, "there's been a coup."*

*There was a rush of conversation and shushing.*

*"President Martin has stepped down. A government statement says that his retirement has been caused by ill health. It's no longer clear whether the Constitution remains in effect. The military has announced that Broadwell is taking over until they get things sorted out. Congress is reported to have approved the step."*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

*"A coup?" said Jason. "In the United States?"*

*"We'll keep you informed as the situation warrants." The Director seemed to be having trouble breathing. "Our only course is to recognize that we're two hundred million miles away, and we should simply concentrate on doing our jobs. Thank you for your attention."*

*"They can't do that," stammered Murray. "They don't have the authority."*

*"Where's the President?" asked Judy.*

*Sam was still pressing his earphones. "The Tampa White House, apparently. Worldwide says he's asking everybody to support Broadwell for the duration."*

*Beyond the plasteel, the low red hills stretched to the horizon.*

*Nobody said much. It struck Warren that perhaps the void between the worlds, black and deep and empty, could twist reality, could spirit away the mundane and insinuate shadows and phantoms. This Broadwell, for example. Warren had never heard of him. And now he was running the country?*

*Judy shook it away, as if she too sensed that the sandscape invited illusion. She smiled at Warren, suggesting it would all be okay.*

*The pyramid and the pyramid tablet had been set side by side on a work table. She sat down in front of them. She looked first at the tablet, on which the crocodilian Martian lifted the glowing pyramid, its head bowed. And then at the pyramid itself, cool and remote. But something was different about the pyramid.*

*"Warren," she said, "look at this."*

*Warren looked. "It's redder than it was."*

*"It is, isn't it?" Now that was unsettling. "O god of the pyramid," she said. "I'd be delighted if you'd speak to us."*

*Later, Warren would recall with a smile that it wasn't exactly a formulation to conjure up other-worldly powers. But the lights dimmed and the pyramid brightened. And a quivering singsong cacophony erupted inside the dome.*

*The voice, if indeed it was a voice, was pitched high. Warren glanced up at the speakers, but Sam shook his head. The sound wasn't coming from them.*

*"The pyramid." Judy almost fell out of her chair, getting away from it. The others circled the table, but kept a discreet distance.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

*"Why don't we button up?" suggested Abu Hassam. Abu's background was medical — he was a physician — but his specialty was math. He'd worked with Murray's group on the translation.*

*Sam closed the shields, which shut off the sunlight, and turned off the lamps. Warren stared at the pyramid, stared into the pyramid. Deep in its interior, a ruby glow pulsed in time to Warren's own heartbeat.*

*The ventilators were loud.*

*"Is someone there?" asked Judy.*

***"Yes."** The voice sounded disembodied, spectral, inhuman. It chilled Warren.*

*"Who are you?" asked Murray.*

***"I've already told you my name."***

*Warren glanced at Sam, who was shaking his head and muttering* no no no.

*Out in the hills, at the edge of vision, a buggy was crawling over the lip of a crater.*

*"You're the god — " Her voice went off the top of the scale and she had to pull back and start again. "You're the god of this place?"*

***"I'm the Administrator."***

*"Where are you?" asked Patti hesitantly. "Are you located inside the pyramid?"*

***"The 'pyramid' is a communication device."** Warren could hear the quotation marks. **"You are from the third planet."** It wasn't a question.*

*"Yes," said Murray. "Are you* alive?"

***"Define the term. My grasp of your language is tenuous. I don't even know its name."***

*"English," said Charlie Kepper, an archaeologist who had done most of his previous digging around North American Native mounds.*

*"Keep it simple," said Jill. "Are you aware of your own existence?"*

*It chuckled. **"How would you reply if I asked you that question?"***

*"Okay," said Murray. "You said you're the Administrator. What did you administrate?"*

***"Mostly transportation among the five cities. I had other responsibilities as well. But nothing demanding."***

*"What five cities? There are no cities out there."*

***"Well, of course you can't* see them. How did you people manage to cross the void from the third world?"**

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

*"The cities are buried," said Eddie.*

***"Very good. I always thought the monkeys — do I have the right word? — had possibilities."***

*That stunned everybody. Patti broke the long silence that followed. "You're familiar with Earth?"*

***"The third world? The People were familiar with it, and I through them."***

*"The People?" said Patti. "You mean the Martians?"*

***"The People were not native to this world."***

*Warren finally found his voice. "You're talking about them in the past tense. Are they dead?"*

***"Extinct, yes. Dead."***

*"How long ago?" asked Jill.*

***"This world has completed its orbit six thousand seventeen times since the last of them died. But they forgot who they were long before that."***

*"And who were they?"*

***"A race of great accomplishment and much promise. But the very qualities that drove their energies betrayed them."***

*"In what way?"*

***"They questioned everything. Disputed everything. And if they were thereby enabled to uncover the deepest secrets of the cosmos, they were also unable to achieve long-term political stability. Those who came here were refugees."***

*"Where did they come from?"*

***"I am unable to think how I might show you. Let me say only that, if their home star were a hundred times closer, it would still not be visible, I suspect, to your unaided eyes."***

*"And they came to Mars." Murray looked out at the sterile landscape. "Why not Earth?"*

***"It was too crowded with predators. And life. The gravity index was too high. Practical matters aside, they considered this world more beautiful."***

*"Why did they die off?" asked Bryan Trahan, who had been observing quietly. "What happened to them?"*

***"After we had settled, after a period of great achievement, they***

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

***began again to disagree. Sometimes on form of government. Sometimes on the ethics of certain medical procedures. Sometimes on the value of literary works. Their quarrels splintered them into smaller and more hostile fragments. We could have removed the part of them that resisted socialization. Could have tamed it. But that issue itself became divisive. They loved combat.***

***"Eventually they became subject to their own technology, lost the knowledge without which reason is only of limited use. And they retreated into their own barbaric past."***

*Jason picked up one of the tablets.*

***"Yes. That is exactly right. They forgot who I was. Who they were. They converted the surface villas, which were designed to allow appreciation of the vistas of this world, into places of worship."***

*"And you," said Bryan, "became the resident deity."*

*It laughed. The sound was bone-chilling.* ***"Yes. Toward the end, they were killing one another to curry my favor."***

*"Why didn't you stop them?" asked Judy, her voice cold.*

***"It was not my prerogative to interfere, but only to help."***

*"My God," said Warren. "It sounds like one of the laws of robotics."*

*"What?" asked Bryan.*

*Warren was surprised that anyone in that group would not have heard of the three laws of robotics. "A robot must obey a human," he said.*

***"I am not a robot."***

*Patti stared at the pyramid.*

*"And they did this while you watched?" asked Murray.*

*There was no answer. As the silence stretched out, they glanced uncomfortably at each other.*

*"Do you have a moral sense?" asked Eddie.*

***"That's an impertinent question, Edwards."***

*"You know who I am."*

***"I know who all of you are."***

*"You," said Bryan, "are able to tell us their whole history. Right?"*

***"Yes."***

*"Not only here, but on the home world."*

***"I do not have all that in my memory, but I can make it available."***

*"How?"*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

***"It is stored in the ships."***

*Murray's face clouded. "The ships," he said. "The vehicles they used to cross the stars."*

***"Yes."***

*"What kind of vehicles?" asked Eddie. "How fast were they?"*

***"They traveled at multiples of light speed."***

*"My God," said Judy. "You can give us FTL."*

***"There is little that the People did not understand about the mechanics of the universe. That which is allowed, they were capable of performing. I suspect you do not have antigravity?"***

*"No."*

***"Temporal manipulation?"***

*"Probably not."*

***"Quantum power?"***

*"Not to speak of. But you can make all this available to us?"*

***"If you wish. You might want to consider whether you have the wisdom to control the capabilities I can provide."***

*"Where are the ships?" asked Abu.*

***"In the asteroid belt. I will give you their location if you will do something for me."***

*"I thought," said Judy, "there'd be something."*

*Murray looked puzzled. "What could you possibly want from us?"*

***"I've been here a long time. I want you to disengage my circuits. Give me peace."***

*"You mean* kill *you?" asked Patti, shocked.*

***"I mean terminate my existence."***

*"We can't do that," said Bryan. "We can't kill a sentient creature."*

***"I'm a machine."***

*Abu shook his head. "You said you weren't a robot."*

***"It is my request. You have an obligation to honor it."***

*"We're not bound to honor* someone else's *code of conduct," said Jason, lowering himself into a chair. "Listen, I understand you've been alone for centuries. But you'll never be alone again. Someone will always be here." He looked up at Murray. "Won't we, Murray?"*

***"I don't think you understand. I don't wish to give offense, but***

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

***you're not appropriate companions for me. There's hope for you, but you still lack the subtlety of an advanced intellect."***

*Eddie sighed. "Advanced intellect? You used to run subways."*

***"Good. I'm pleased to see you have a sense of humor. If the behavior exhibited on the reports coming in from your home world is typical, I can understand why."***

IT WAS TIME TO BREAK OFF. "We'll deal with it tomorrow," I told them. "We'll discuss the issue in the morning, and when we know what we want to do, we'll recall the Administrator and give him our answer."

Technically, when the program had ended for the day, the Baranovians were expected to get away from it. They were supposed to go boating or play shuffleboard or just sit around in The Hawk's Nest. But Sam explained to me that these people took the game very seriously. I'd already seen some evidence of that tendency when Murray's team stayed up wrestling with the translations. On this third night, they could be found in groups all over Skyhawk, in conference rooms, along the benches, out on the terrace behind the dining room, debating the choice that had been laid before them.

Could they comply with the wish of a sentient being and, in effect, kill it? After all, Patti argued to a small group outside the boathouse, there's nothing physically wrong with it. It's only depressed. Killing it would be murder.

Warren Hatch and Eddie Edwards almost came to blows. Warren also thought it would be murder. But Eddie explained that he'd kept a cancer-ridden sister alive against her will. When he described the experience, his eyes grew wet. "Never again," he said. "If this thing wants to be terminated, then I think we should comply."

Warren shook his head. "Even if you have to violate your own moral code to do so?"

Maureen and I felt so good about what we were seeing that we left the grounds and went downtown to celebrate. There was a small college town nearby with a hotel featuring a sidewalk restaurant. The evening was pleasant, there were no insects, and the moonlight was serene. We started

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

with BLT's, and finished with gin tonics. "I think we can relax now," she said. "The program's going to be fine."

We'd both been worried. Neither of us had participated in anything like this previously, and we hadn't been sure what to expect. Sam had warned us how last year the Baranovians had solved the Moonbase murder mystery too quickly and simply taken the program away from the advisors. We'd built elements into the Martian scenario to ensure that didn't happen again. But you never knew.

"Thanks," I said.

She squeezed my hand. "What interests me is that they've got so involved in the ethical dilemma that they haven't yet seen the political implications."

Each evening, I'd prepared the set of bulletins that would come in the following day from Worldwide News and Mars Central. I'd written a complete set before coming, but quickly discovered it was impossible to predict what the program would need. Although I could keep the flow of action within parameters, I could not determine in advance what might need to be emphasized here, or redefined there. For example, Maureen was right: the Baranovians needed to think about the world beyond their dome. And we were going to see to that first thing tomorrow.

And in case you're wondering, no, I didn't score. Not then and not later. I think she liked my mind.

*Sam was listening to the earphones again. "Things are going downhill," he said. He pushed a button. Explosions and gun shots rattled out of the speakers. And screams.*

*" — Show no sign of backing off, Howard." Warren recognized the speaker as Christine Talley, a correspondent for Worldwide. "I can see three, possibly four, people down in the street. All civilians. The soldiers now are trying to go house to house. But there are snipers in the upper apartments. We're getting reports that it's like this all over Atlanta." They could hear the sound of an approaching helicopter. "We're still hearing rumors of summary executions. But the Army won't comment." She was shouting now to be heard over the roar of the aircraft. "Okay, you can see what's happening, Howard. The gunships are positioning themselves directly over the houses where most of the shooting has been*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

*coming from. The troops are keeping their distance." (Long pause. Then:) "We've got company."*

*Another voice: "You'll have to leave, ma'am. For your own safety."*

*After that, everything dissolved into confusion: shouts, protests, the sounds of a brief scuffle. Then Howard Kilminster from the Worldwide desk: "We've encountered technical difficulties for the moment with Christine Talley in Atlanta. We'll get back to her as soon as we're able. Meanwhile, the Pentagon has confirmed that two Regimental Combat Teams in the Chicago area have fired on other U.S. troops — "*

*Somebody said, "Turn it off." Sam complied and the room got very quiet.*

*"Not sure what we're going to have to go home to," said Judy.*

*Warren wondered about his two kids living with his first wife in Philadelphia, and about his sister in Ardmore. Were they in danger? What was really happening?*

*Murray Fineberg had been standing staring out at the bleak red sky. "Something we need to think about," he said. "We may be about to come into possession of some very high-level technology."*

*Warren understood immediately where* that *was going.*

*"Do we really want to turn quantum power, whatever that is, over to a military dictatorship?" asked Abu.*

*"It's not a military dictatorship," said Jason hotly.*

*"I think," said Warren, "it would be prudent to assume the worst."*

*Al Finley, a newspaper editor from Toronto, suggested they divide into two teams to address each of the issues they now faced: Do they terminate the Administrator? Do they accept the advanced technology, knowing it will end up in the hands of the government?*

*But everyone had things to say on both topics, so they stayed together. And it became apparent that no one had settled anything the previous evening. On the issue of euthanasia, several had gone through personal experiences with dying relatives and friends that they had no intention of repeating. Honor its wishes, they said.*

*Others maintained they were being asked to participate in the moral equivalent of murder. "Maybe worse," said Patti Kubik. "If this thing really* is *a higher life form than we are, as it would like us to believe, then killing it is that much more reprehensible. I won't have*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

*anything to do with it. And I'm not sure I'll allow anyone else to shut it down."*

*They ended in deadlock. The debate over accepting high-tech capabilities went easier. All had reservations, but almost everyone thought the risk was worth it. "We get starships," said Judy Conroy. "How can we walk away from that?"*

*Only Al Finley held out. "You get starships. And you also get* 1984. *It's the prime directive in reverse. Technology without a corresponding social maturity is potentially deadly. I don't think we should touch it. Tell the Administrator to get on the radio, if it can, and send the ships to Alpha Centauri. Maybe by the time we can follow them we'll be able to handle the stuff."*

*But no one supported him.*

*They voted on the euthanasia issue, and decided by a majority of one to comply with the Administrator's wishes. The losing side wanted to reopen the discussion, but Jake Cobblemere intervened. "It's over," he said. "We terminate."*

*That produced some grumbling and three people walked out in protest, announcing their intention to return to Central rather than participate in murder. Warren was tempted to join them, but he'd listened to the arguments and was no longer sure in his own mind what was right.*

*The pyramid rested serenely on the worktable.*

*"Administrator," said Judy.*

***"I've been listening."***

*"Then you know what we've decided."*

***"I know."***

*"You will have to explain what we need to do to shut off your power."*

***"That will not be necessary."***

*"Why? I don't understand."*

***"I no longer have much ability to maintain my own systems. The darkness is very close. I would, in fact, have allowed myself to pass out of existence almost a century ago, your time. Except that I detected radio signals. I knew you were coming."***

*"And you held on?"*

***"Yes."***

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

*"Why did you lie? About wanting us to terminate you?"*

***"The technology of the People lies waiting to be claimed. But it is hard to judge the morality of a species by its radio broadcasts. I know you share their unfortunate tendencies toward political disunion. But I needed a better method to grasp your moral inclinations before I turned this over to you. I wanted to look you in the eye, so to speak."***

*"And you will give us the ships?" asked Judy. They held their breath.*

***"Yes," he said. "I will give you the ships."***

*"I don't believe it," said Patti. "We vote to commit murder, and you give us credit for a moral code. I have to tell you I have some doubts about yours."*

***"Patti," it said, "I did not mean to imply that your course of action was the correct one. I was only concerned that you not find the decision an easy one to make."***

"It's a copout," said Bryan. "These plots that build up to a conclusion in which we discover it's a test of some sort are really weak. But that's not the point."

We were in the dining hall. I'd finished off a pretty good meatloaf with mashed potatoes, corn and muffins, and I'd gone heavy on the butter, which is a delicacy I seldom allow myself anymore. But I was feeling good because the program had gone well, or at least I'd thought it had until Bryan came after me.

"What *is* the point?" I asked him. We'd filled three tables, as we did every evening, and the entire twenty-odd Baranovians, who a moment before had been planning the festivities for this final evening, gave us their undivided attention.

"The AI says that the conclusion isn't important. That the only thing that matters is that we had to struggle to come to it. But what kind of response is that? We still don't know what, given the circumstances, the appropriate course of action is. And neither do you, or you'd have had an answer."

I'd played the AI, of course. And Bryan was right: I had no more clue about the eternal verities than anybody else did. How was I supposed to say what was right and what wrong? "It might be," I said, "that some situations are so morally hazy that no clearcut course of action can be

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

found. This situation, for example, seems to be a case of choosing the lesser evil."

"But which *is* the lesser evil?" He sounded almost desperate.

"Bryan, I'm not able to answer that for other people. I think we need to keep a little perspective about all this. Maybe even indulge our sense of humor. You *do* have one, right? I mean, this thing does have its comic aspect."

Tears stood in his eyes. "Damn you, Jake," he said. He said it low, but he'd already drawn the attention of everybody at all three tables. He looked around at the others, heaved a loud discouraged sigh, and walked out into the failing sunlight. I watched him stride down the concrete walkway and turn left toward the bungalows. The path curves into the trees and disappears behind a conference hall. He never looked back.

"What was *that* all about?" asked Sam.

"I don't know," said Maureen. She looked puzzled.

"You okay?" I said.

"You notice his eyes?"

"Yes. Teary."

"More than that."

"What?"

"I don't know. *Different.*"

"How *different*?"

"The man has secrets," she said.

The Baranovians did reconvene later that evening, but somehow their festivities weren't as festive as I'd expected. Bryan wasn't there, in body, but I felt his presence just over my shoulder and had no idea what to do about it. Though nobody said a word, I think everyone else felt it, too, mentally replaying his last scene and trying to figure out what to make of it.

So we went through the motions, voting on a topic for next year's seminar and then adjourning to the lakeshore for a spirited enactment of the Martian ceremonies depicted on our tablets. The centerpiece was a roaring bonfire around which bizarrely costumed Baranovians feasted on "sacred marshmallows" and sacrificed a stuffed Barney. The script was even sillier than it sounds, and it could have made for a great party, but our hearts weren't in it. At least mine wasn't.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I found myself drifting off to where Maureen stood in the shadows, staring pensively into the flames. "You thinking about him, too?" I asked.

"Of course," she said. "Looking back, there were a lot of little things...." She turned toward Sam, who was just a few feet away. "Sam, how long has Bryan been coming to the seminars?"

"I think this was his second," he said. "Yes. You've noticed how quiet he is — "

"Except when he's coming after me," I said.

"Well, yes. I guess so. But on the whole he doesn't say much. He was so quiet last year I remember wondering why he'd bothered to come. Then the last day — at this point in the proceedings — he finally started talking."

"About what?" asked Maureen.

Sam frowned. "I think it was during the discussion over what we would do *this* year. I think he was the one who suggested the *archaeology on Mars* scenario."

"You think?"

"I'm sure," he said. "He suggested it, and he pushed hard for it. Got his way, as it turned out."

Something nagged me about that. Quiet stranger shows up, takes little part in the current game but campaigns hard for a specific scenario for next time. Gets his wish — and ends up in a funk when it doesn't reach the resolution he'd hoped for.

What resolution had he wanted?

"Should we try to find him?" I asked Sam. "See if there's anything we can do?"

Sam thought awhile before he answered. "No. No, I don't think so. He's a big boy, Jake." He smiled at the joke.

But he didn't sound very sure.

I didn't sleep well that night, even though the seminar had gone well and I should have felt proud and contented.

Next morning everyone said their goodbyes at breakfast — everyone except Bryan, who wasn't there. Nobody, including the desk clerk, had seen him leave — but his account was paid. I asked to see his room and found it made up, even though the maids hadn't started their morning rounds. Had he done it himself?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

* * *

Questions unanswered, I tossed two small bags into the back of my Honda, checked out, and started the long, lonely drive home to Indianapolis. It was a good day for it, a huge dome of high pressure keeping the scenery crisp and the driving easy most of the way, though I did run into a couple of late afternoon thunderstorms.

I could have made the whole trip in one day, but that would have been too long and grueling for my tastes. I had a vague idea about stopping somewhere around Toledo for the night, which would give me a moderate day today and an easy one tomorrow. With lots of solo time on my hands, I "read" half a book on the car's tape player.

Eventually, saturation set in and I switched it off as I pulled into a rest area somewhere on the Ohio Turnpike. Something must have been gradually gnawing its way up out of my subconscious, because when I returned to the car after a visit to the facilities and a stroll around the grounds, I found myself reaching for the trunk key instead of the ignition. I watched curiously as my hand opened one of my bags and pulled out the list Sam had passed out last night with the names and addresses of all the Baranovians.

Bryan's address, as my subconscious must have already noted, was an apartment somewhere in northwestern Ohio. I didn't recognize the name of the town, but a check of the map showed that it wasn't *that* far out of my way.

Two exits later, I left the Turnpike, threading my way through vast expanses of tall corn and soybeans on a neat lattice of arrow-straight roads.

It was almost dark when I got there — late enough that common sense said I should nail down a room before I did anything else. But then, common sense wouldn't have advised this detour in the first place. So I went directly to Bryan's address, near the edge of a sleepy little college town.

His apartment was the attic of an old house on a quiet, tree-lined street still slick from the afternoon's showers. The whole house was dark, except that I thought I could see a faint flickering light through a dormer window near the back upstairs. I sat in the car for a few minutes, thinking. Then I walked across the street and up Bryan's outside stairway.

Paint was peeling from the door. I knocked.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

No answer. I knocked again. "Bryan?" I called softly, not wishing to attract attention from neighbors.

Still no answer. There was no glass in the door, and I couldn't lean out far enough from the steep stairs to see in the window — but there was definitely light in there, flickering and changing color.

I knocked still again and began trying to think up a story to get the landlord to let me in. Hell, how would I even find out who the landlord was?

Did I have time to waste trying? I had no concrete reason to believe Bryan was in danger, but the way he'd been acting, who could tell what was going on? And I felt vaguely responsible. It was clear that, if it was possible to bring suit against science fiction writers for malpractice, he would have come after me.

I fell back on the obvious and got lucky. The door was unlocked.

Carelessness? Or did he want me — or somebody — to find it that way?

THE ROOM TASTED WEIRD. I know how that sounds, but I stood in the dark and felt the hair on my scalp rise. The flickering I'd seen came from a computer in one corner, its screen filled with a screen saver like none I'd ever seen. It made me think of those pictures of the star nursery that the Hubble sent back a couple of years ago, but animated, suggesting the way those colorful gas clouds might look if you were flying through them. I felt oddly light, as if gravity were less in here than outside. It might have been a hypnotic effect induced by the screen saver. At least, that's what I thought. What I told myself.

I switched on the room light, a bare bulb in the ceiling, but the giddy sensation didn't go away. I looked around.

The room looked abandoned. A narrow bed stood unmade in one corner. I saw no other furniture except a rickety chair in front of the computer — which, with the lights on, was a perfectly ordinary Macintosh. I wondered why it had been left on.

The room whispered clearly that its occupant had left in a hurry and wasn't coming back. Like most young bachelors, he hadn't dusted all that often, and he hadn't cleaned up after he removed the few things he'd taken with him. A couple of clean rectangles on the floor, with rows of dust

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bunnies along the baseboard behind them, said there had been other furnishings, but precious few beyond what remained.

One other item caught my eye and drew it irresistibly: a picture on the far wall. It was hardly surprising that a Baranovian would decorate with science fiction art, but even from here, this was one of the most realistic portraits of an unearthly landscape I had ever seen. Three crystal towers of varying heights and slightly different aspect rose against a background of pink and blue mountains. The towers gleamed in double sunlight. In the foreground, a broad river rolled through a purple forest. Something I couldn't quite make out soared above the water on giant butterfly wings.

It was, I thought, one of those computerized productions that are virtually indistinguishable from photography — or, in this case, the best holography I'd ever seen. It looked utterly three-dimensional, and when I put my face close to the glass I could see way out to the sides.

I shivered. *Who are you, Bryan?*

A photo and a computer.

*Not* a photo, I reminded myself.

I sat down at the computer, clicked the mouse, and the screen saver dissolved to several rows of curious symbols. It was no script I knew, and I can recognize a lot of scripts even if I can't read them.

I tried changing it to every font in the menu, but all I got was gibberish. I went through the other menus, and among the desk accessories I found two unfamiliar icons with labels that looked like that same script. I tried one of them and got nothing. But the other...

The screen melted into a greeting:

**HELLO JAKE**

The chair was on rollers and I backed away a foot or so, and almost fell off.

**YOUR PROBLEM IS THAT YOU CONFUSE GOOD WILL WITH ANALYSIS, EMOTION WITH VIRTUE. IT IS BOTH YOUR STRENGTH AND YOUR WEAKNESS.**

What the hell was he talking about? Did he mean *me*?

I could see into the kitchen, where two pots had been left atop a battered range. Somewhere outside, a garage door banged down.

**GOOD INTENTIONS DON'T COUNT FOR MUCH, JAKE. SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO GET IT RIGHT.**

**I'D HOPED FOR A SOLUTION. INSTEAD, I SUSPECT YOU'VE INHERITED A PROBLEM.**

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I stared at it, trying to understand. What problem had I inherited? What were we talking about?

**SORRY.**

It ended there.

Heart hammering, I went through all the right motions, saving the document, printing a copy, and exiting from word processing. When the menu appeared onscreen, I turned off the room lights and went to stand by the window, looking out. The sky had cleared behind the storms and there were few street lights.

My first thought was: it was a hoax. In fact, that's the answer I'd prefer. It's the answer I could sleep with. But I know it's not so. I knew it wasn't so the moment I shut down the Macintosh, and felt my weight flow back.

It didn't take me long to figure out what kind of problem he'd handed me. I guess he'd intended it as a gift. Or maybe it was just to prove he had a sense of humor. I disconnected the computer, carried it outside and put it in my trunk.

*Poor Bryan.*

I wish him well, wherever he is and whatever he might choose to do. I know so little about just what kind of fix he was in or what kind of pressure he was under. I don't know how directly the Seminar applied to it. But I do know that, for him, it wasn't just a game — and that he was looking to us for help we couldn't quite give him.

I'm more conscious of the presence of Mars in the night sky than I used to be. While I'm writing this, it's visible through my window, over Kegan's tool shed.

We've got an easier way to get there now. It's out in my garage, covered by a tarp. But I wonder what a truly three-dimensional society, utterly released from the demands of gravity and friction, might be like.

Bryan's right. I can't analyze what changes it might bring. But I can sure *feel* them.

*The authors are grateful to the organizers of and participants in The Asimov Seminar for accepting us as their own, and for inspiring this story. For further information, contact The Asimov Seminar, PO Box 54, Rensselaerville, NY 12147. E-mail address: info@asisem.org. The Asimov Seminar also has a website at http:/www.asisem.org.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

# Books To Look For

## CHARLES DE LINT

COINCIDENTALLY, the week I began reading for this month's column saw the arrival of a handful of books all linked by their subject matter: cats. Or to be more precise, stories told from the viewpoint of cats.

For all the readers of this column who have now perked up with interest, I'm guessing there's an equal, or even larger, group rolling their eyes because, so far as they're concerned, fiction told from the viewpoint of anthropomorphized animals are usually a) cloyingly saccharine, b) highly annoying, or c) both of the above.

I fit into both camps myself. On the one hand, I grew up with *The Wind in the Willows* (and it's still a favorite book), Ernest Thompson Seton, Henry Williamson's *Tarka the Otter*, and the like. In fact, I'd say that this sort of reading was as instrumental in my eventual interest in sf and fantasy as were fairy tales and myths, since it was my first experience in seeing the world from inside an alien skin.

(Which isn't to say that Kenneth Grahame's classic is particularly instructive along those lines. Like Tolkien's Shire, and the hobbits inhabiting it, *The Wind in the Willows* offers a glimpse into a lost slice of English county life more than anything else, but I digress.)

On the other hand, I can get just as annoyed with such books myself. The cuteness factor is one downside, but what I find even more irritating is when the animal character could just as easily have been human. In other words, the animal viewpoint is there merely to add an exotic veneer to an otherwise ordinary adventure/fantasy story. William Horwood's *Duncton Wood* books, for all their otherwise charm and interest, could as easily have been about humans as moles because the moles acted as humans in furry skins, rather than animals. Their moleishness was a gimmick, rather than a revelation. Far more

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

interesting, and better written, were his *The Stonor Eagles* and *Callanish* where we get under the more alien skin of his eagle protagonists. Fans of this sort of story should also check out Garry Kilworth's animal fantasies such as *Hunter's Moon* and *House of Tribes* for books where the author has got it right.

But enough of this introduction. Let's see how the books in hand fare.

*The Autobiography of Foudini M. Cat,* by Susan Fromberg Schaeffer, Knopf, 1997, $18.95.

Schaeffer's novel is a sweet, simple tale of a housecat (Foudini) relating his life story as a form of instruction to the household's new kitten, Grace. There are mystical elements, such as Foudini's conversations with the ghosts of the cats of Freud and Cleopatra, and a magical door, but mostly the book is a straightforward narrative of a housecat's coming of age and maturing, told in a warm, anecdotal manner.

What makes the novel so affecting is that Schaeffer sticks close to what a cat's thoughts might actually encompass. Foudini and Grace's actions will be entirely familiar to anyone who shares a living space with a cat, but no less fascinating for that. A good writer can make any sort of a story riveting and Schaeffer does that here with enviable ease. From Foudini's descriptions of Grace's kittenish antics, to misadventures with washing machines and the narrator's touching relationship with the family dog, there's not one false note.

Poignant, mysterious, funny, sad, Foudini's autobiography proved to be a surprise and a delight.

*The Wild Road,* by Gabriel King, Del Rey, 1998, $24.95.

*The Wild Road* is more along the lines of Tad Williams' *Tailchaser's Song,* or the novels of Richard Adams: a fantasy quest given a new set of clothes through the use of animals as characters, rather than the expected humans teamed up with the various denizens of Faery. The protagonist Tag is given the task of finding and rescuing the King and Queen of cats, and then providing a safe journey for them to Tintagel. Like traditional fantasy novels, Tag soon acquires a motley group of companions on his quest — including a magpie and a fox, as well as various cats — and there is even a mysteri-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ous wizard-like figure to play the Gandalf role.

But while the story may owe elements to Tolkien, Gabriel King is an accomplished writer. Or should I say, "they are," since King is actually a combination of M. John Harrison and Jane Johnson. Happily, the pair's collaboration results in a single, and singular, voice that makes what might have been a rehash in new garb an enjoyable story in its own right. The characters are well drawn, the prose flows easily, and the English setting seen from a cat's eye view works well. There are also some nice touches such as the mysterious roadways, linked to the leys that criss-cross England, that have been used by cats since the dawn of time. Other, less-used byways allow a traveler a peek into times past.

From the tie-ins to actual historical events (witch burnings, the Great Fire of London), through to Tag's coming of age as an apprentice to the mysterious Majicou and his journey from London to Cornwall, *The Wild Road* is an engaging addition to the growing subgenre of animal-based fantasies. It's the sort of book that will appeal equally to mainstream and fantasy readers.

* * *

*The Book of Night with Moon*, by Diane Duane, Aspect/Warner, 1997, $12.99.

*The Book of Night with Moon* doesn't fare quite so well. Like *The Wild Road*, it's a high fantasy with animal characters, this time set in New York City, but unlike the effortless prose of the King novel, this story bogs down with too much background explanation and made-up, cat-language words that this reader, at least, stumbled over, reminded each time that this was a book I was reading. I understand the why of the invented language — it's to add a foreign flavor to the proceedings — but really, if we're going to translate the rest of the cats' dialogue into English, why not translate it all?

The cats here are wizards, small prides protecting various portions of the world. They report to higher-ups, receive instructions from Goddesses, interact and have conversation with human wizards, and generally play the part of wise, capable, high fantasy, elfin-like figures who merely happen to be cats. And everyone is a wizard. Or a special wizard. Or carrying some aspect of a god/goddess. By the time we get to the climax, set in a primordial version of New York City, the fantasy/

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cosmic element has been turned up to a Spinal Tap eleven.

Which isn't to say that there aren't some fun touches, such as the cats' ability to walk on stairs of air and the discussions on "cat chess." Fans of Duane's "Young Wizards" series will also enjoy a cameo by Nita and Kit from those books. And there's an extremely touching scene on pages 263-264 which I don't want to describe for fear of spoiling it for potential readers, but the novel could have used more such down-to-earth moments to break up the cosmic wow that pervades most of the proceedings.

Actually, I'm probably — no, certainly — the wrong person to be reviewing this novel. As a teenager I would have adored it. But after reading variations on this story for over thirty years now, the cat skins covering the otherwise typical characters to be found in a high fantasy simply wasn't enough to make it feel fresh.

*Asleep in the Sun*, by Hans Silvester, Chronicle Books, 1997, $39.95

Having looked at the world through how humans imagine cats might think, it seems only fair to end this column by giving the cats the final word. Not with voices, of course, but as the photos collected here show, cats don't need voices to display the full range of their character. Mysterious, shy, goofy, sly, hunter, laze-about....

*Asleep in the Sun* is a follow-up to Silvester's *The Mediterranean Cat* (briefly discussed in the September 1996 installment of this column) and once again he's gone to the Greek Islands to photograph the feral cats living there in their extended families. Though it might be clichéd to say so, these portraits say far more about cats than all the words we might care to write about them.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

# BOOKS

## ROBERT K.J. KILLHEFFER

*The War Amongst the Angels*, by Michael Moorcock, Avon, 1997, $24.

*Donnerjack*, by Roger Zelazny and Jane Lindskold, Avon, 1997, $24.

*American Goliath*, by Harvey Jacobs, St. Martin's Press, 1997, $24.95.

*Slippage: Previously Uncollected, Precariously Poised Stories*, by Harlan Ellison, Houghton Mifflin, 1997, $22.

I REMEMBER how shocked I was when Frank Herbert died back in 1986, and then Robert Heinlein in 1988. Isaac Asimov's passing in 1992 sent a tremor through me, but by then it had sunk in that these losses were only going to become more frequent. The shock had faded, but a broader melancholy had replaced it.

Roger Zelazny's death in 1995 stung me afresh, because he belonged to a later era. I hadn't prepared myself to see writers of the '60s and '70s start vanishing from the world already. And now Judith Merril is gone. Though she was, chronologically, more a contemporary of Asimov's than of Zelazny's, she'll always remain in my mind a part of that rebellious adolescent period that has become known as the New Wave.

The loss of Judith Merril left me thinking about that Wave, kindled a curiosity about its legacy. I thought I'd take a look at what some of the writers identified with that raucous period were doing today, since most of them are still with us, still writing — and some, like Zelazny, left new work only now seeing publication.

As editor of the British magazine *New Worlds*, Michael Moorcock was one of the central figures of the New Wave, and over the years he has continued to push

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the boundaries of the genre in his own fiction. His most recent novel, *The War Amongst the Angels*, is the third book in the sequence begun in *Blood* (1995) and continued in the short story collection *Fabulous Harbors* (1997). It's devilishly hard to convey its substance in any kind of traditional summary, but I'll try: *War* is concerned mainly with the history of "the Rose," or Countess Rose von Bek, née Margaret Rose Moorcock, before the events of *Blood*, and with her fate and that of her comrades Jack Karaquazian, Colinda Dovero, and Sam Oakenhurst thereafter. Moorcock presents us with a surreal blend of alternate history, metaphysical fantasy, and autobiography which works like an enchantment, a dream-vision that never collapses into an entirely rational order. The Rose inhabits a post-War Britain wherein eighteenth-century highwaymen still ply their trade, preying on the trams of the tyrannical Universal Transport Company. Teenaged Rose joins these honorable thieves for a time, but soon she learns to walk the silver roads between the worlds of the multiverse (which eventually lead her to the events of *Blood*). She becomes a player at the Game of Time, the eternal struggle between Chaos and Order.

Over the decades, Moorcock has continued to interweave his various fictional worlds, uniting the tales of Elric with those of Jerry Cornelius with those of Ulrich von Bek, and *The War Amongst the Angels* carries that process to new heights, blending those fictional — and largely fantastical — worlds with details from Moorcock's own life, a portrait of life in post-War England that's not far from purely mimetic realism. Scenes of the Rose's youth often read like plain mainstream fiction; the exploits of the highwaymen recall Dumas and Sabatini; and the battles between Chaos and Order are so space operatic they verge on parody. Moorcock delights in this juxtaposition: the tone lurches and shifts enough to make the reader seasick, but Moorcock makes it work.

Indeed, this may be Moorcock's most experimental fiction to date: he comes as near as I've seen anyone do to dispensing with linear narrative altogether, without reducing his tale to a hodgepodge of disconnected parts. It's virtually impossible to keep all the stray details straight as the story shifts from viewpoint to viewpoint, timeframe to timeframe. One moment we're reading first-person Rose, then third-person Karaquazian, then

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

first-person Dovero, and struggling all the while to keep track of when each scene is supposed to be taking place in reference to the others. Occasionally a detail in one scene will seem to contradict a detail from another. Yet, for all the confusion, Moorcock achieves a coherent effect. We emerge at the end feeling that we've lived a story — a story perhaps larger and richer than could have been told in a more linear, internally consistent fashion.

*The War Amongst the Angels* certainly upholds many New Wave ideals — the focus on human values in fantastical circumstances, the striving for greater and stranger levels of literary complexity — but there's something different as well. Moorcock isn't simply carrying on the tradition: he's reconsidering and revising it. An aura of maturity pervades the book, a sense of distance and the wisdom that comes with it. In his earlier books, the forces of Chaos and Order seemed purely antithetical, and the eternal conflict between them often seemed more meaningful than any less mythic way of life, but in this sequence of books a different feeling has taken root. The challenge that the Rose and the others face is in keeping the two sides in balance — so that they can return to their lives in the smaller-scale world of the everyday. At one point the war in heaven has spilled the bodies and body parts of angels all over the Rose's childhood country home, killing some of her old friends, poisoning the ground and the nearby lake, and it (literally) brings home the sense that it's the simpler reality that's more important. Warring angels only make misery for people.

It's not hard to read into that a commentary on the long-standing Old Wave-New Wave conflict (which continues today, though rarely under those headings), and Moorcock encourages such a reading with his scenes *en homage* to the pulpy days of *Planet Stories*. He remains true to the central ideals of the New Wave, but he yearns for a balance, a marriage of those values to the spectacle of the Old, a cessation of hostilities. In *The War Amongst the Angels*, Moorcock comes to fulfill the Old Wave, not to abolish it, and in the process he's produced a fascinating, spellbinding work of imagination.

I've often thought of Roger Zelazny as the American counterpart to Michael Moorcock — there seems to me more than a passing resemblance in Zelazny's Amber to Moorcock's multiverse. Not to im-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ply any debt or imitation, one to the other; but it bespeaks some commonality of vision, and perhaps something characteristic of the New Wave. The blending of mythic adventure with quotidian reality; sword and sorcery with the swinging '60s; the fascination with games of chance and nihilistic heros; the metaphysical concept of a higher reality of which we can all be seen as a reflection. ("The old story," as Moorcock puts it, "which is echoed by our own.")

Zelazny's course later in his career did not much resemble Moorcock's, however. While Moorcock turned his hand to mainstream fiction and more experimental elaborations of his older work, Zelazny followed the shouts of the crowd, mining the familiar territory of his most popular creation — Amber — and, for the most part, stripping it of the flourishes which had made it more than run-of-the-mill action-adventure stuff. While Moorcock took more chances, Zelazny took fewer. (At least in his novels — his ambition was undiminished in his shorter work.)

That trend continues in *Donnerjack*, described as the "penultimate" collaboration with Jane Lindskold. It's the story of John D'Arcy Donnerjack, one of the three men behind the creation of Virtù, a vast virtual-reality realm with a significant life of its own. It's a place where people from the "real world," Verité, go to work and to play, but it's also home to thousands of large and small artificial intelligences — *genii loci* who maintain the various realms of Virtù — and, it seems, to mythic entities from the world's many religions. Death, we learn from the start, maintains his own Virtùan realm called Deep Fields, where all the old programs go.

Donnerjack unknowingly falls in love with a woman who is a "proge," and watches her die in his arms in their Virtùan paradise. Distraught, but determined, he pursues her to Deep Fields, and there makes a classic pact with Death: he gets Ayradyss back in return for constructing a grand palace for Death...and his firstborn.

Since it's well known that Veritéans can't breed with Virtùans, Donnerjack thinks it's a deal that can never be fulfilled, but to his surprise Death returns Ayradyss to him in the flesh — in Verité. And, sure enough, she's soon pregnant. So Donnerjack marshalls all he knows of Virtù to protect their child from the grip of Death, but he fails: Death penetrates his defenses to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

take back Ayradyss, and Donnerjack makes another trip to Deep Fields, where he negotiates for his boy's life, and gets at best a brief reprieve. Death is ever tricky; he leaves the boy, but takes Donnerjack himself at his first chance.

And so *Donnerjack* becomes the story of Jay Donnerjack and his own battle with Death, which becomes part of a larger battle which the gods of Virtù plan to bring to Verité. It's up to the boy, with the help of various friends — including a girl who is also the product of a Virtùan-Veritéan union — to oppose the gods themselves, with the whole of the universe at stake.

*Donnerjack* lacks any greater levels of complexity, but it's entertaining enough, and it displays many of the stylistic quirks that make even Zelazny's lesser books a pleasure. He and Lindskold skilfully mingle sober and earthy tones — "In a simple act of animal gratitude, the phant...returned hurriedly to trample the shit out of it"; "The Brass Baboon farted cherry bombs" — and Zelazny's gift for colorful imagery makes Virtù much more than a retread virtual environment. But what makes *Donnerjack* stand out is the poignancy of its focus on Death. Jay saves himself and saves the world (come on, you know he does!), yet Death holds the final dominion, carrying off his father and mother and his elderly best friend before the book is done. Indeed, one of Jay's tasks is to defend Death — "who most of humanity view as the greatest enemy of all" — from the attacks of one of the Virtùan gods. *Donnerjack* gives us a glimpse of what may have been Zelazny's own feelings about his approaching end, grim acceptance coupled with great sadness and an increased appreciation for the love of friends and the pleasures of imagining. Though the book is not among his best, it does provide some glowing testimony to the greatness of the man.

Harvey Jacobs is not a "core" New Wave name, but he started publishing stories during the same period, and his work unquestionably shares some of the traits of the writers who earned themselves that designation. In fact, Jacobs's case makes a good argument for "New Wave" as descriptive of a time period, not a particular group of writers or a concerted literary movement. The New Wave penchant for violating taboos, for mingling tones, for unifying "high" and "low" art, and for humanitarian values, were cultivated in the '60s

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in many areas of life and the arts, not in sf alone.

Where Moorcock and Zelazny draw on ancient myths in their work, Jacobs chooses for his latest novel, *American Goliath*, something more recent and home-grown: the fraud of the Cardiff Giant, an infamous happening from the middle of the 19th century. His story, in outline, sticks pretty closely to the historical facts, insofar as they're known: George Hull, a wealthy New York cigar maker, conceives a plan after hearing a preacher claiming that the "giants in the earth" of Genesis had actually lived on American soil. Hull commissions a rough-hewn statue and has it buried on the poor farmland of an upstate relative, "Stubby" Newell, then he contrives to have it "discovered" in the fall of 1869. Experts from Yale and Cornell debate its nature — is it the petrified remains of an ancient giant, or merely an ancient statue? — but few suspect it's a hoax. Soon Hull and Newell are raking in profits from the thousands who make the pilgrimage to see the Giant, and they're planning a nationwide tour, when the great showman P. T. Barnum gets wind of their gimmick and decides to make it his own — even if he has to fabricate his own copy of the "original" Cardiff Giant.

Where Jacobs departs from the historical record is in his portraits of the characters involved—George Hull and Stubby Newell, their wives, and assorted other denizens of the small towns of Onondaga County, New York. And the Giants, Hull's and Barnum's, whose voices we hear throughout the story. Jacobs's work has always shown an abiding concern for the cruelties that humans visit upon each other, particularly those of racism and intolerance, and he does an excellent job of implying a contemporary moral viewpoint without violating the spirit of the time and place of his tale. Heart-wrenching scenes with Indian children being taught about Jesus, newly free blacks looked down upon by their white peers, and a Jewish dowser who's nearly hung when the Giant is first discovered reveal the frequency of prejudice not so very long ago, but Jacobs's good-humored tone never lets the story become lost in the issues — we laugh *and* cry as the Indian boy, Herbert Black Paw, disputes in confusion with the Reverend Turk: "Because a hungry man is given fruit by his woman is no bad thing," Herbert says about the tale of Adam and Eve. "To seek

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wisdom from such a magic fruit is no bad thing." And he's beaten for his insolence.

Like Moorcock and Zelazny, Jacobs is more interested in achieving truths of the heart and of mood than of any rigorous limitation of his imagination, and thus we get similar juxtapositions of tone in *American Goliath*, particularly in the voices of the Giants: "Logic tells me there is but one Source," thinks the stone that will become the original Giant after it's taken away by George Hull. "Then how am I to explain this edgy suspicion that I'm under new management?" And later, as it plays host to throngs of religious seekers under a tent on Stubby Newell's farm, the Giant ponders his success as compared to Jesus's: "I'm better box-office."

As if to confirm Jacobs's unity with the other writers of the New Wave period, there is even a hint of commentary in the dialogue between the two Giants later in the book. Barnum's Giant envisions a future of driven technological purpose, reaching for stellar empires à la Heinlein, while Hull's Giant insists on a more humane vision: "Where's the escape?" he asks. "To a land without love?...I'm all for building empires and a trip to the stars. But can't we sip from the Dipper without breaking its cup?"

There's no greater gift that the New Wave gave to sf than that resistance to futures "without love." Few sf writers today consider such compassionless fates for the race, and we have writers like Harvey Jacobs to thank for that....

...and writers like Harlan Ellison, too. His latest collection, *Slippage*, though imbued with meditations on mortality and loss and more than a small helping of autobiographical note, continues Ellison's mingling of pulp sf themes and concepts with passionate, fiery, kaleidoscopic prose and a rage undimmed from his younger days. At their worst, the stories here are uninspired sf conceits brought to life with the power of Ellison's writing ("Chatting with Anubis" and "Keyboard" for two); at their best, they are classics to rank with the many gems of Ellison's long career.[1]

"The Man Who Rowed Christopher Columbus Ashore," like

[1]I should note that a couple of the stories I regard as classics here — "The Man Who Rowed Christopher Columbus Ashore" and "Mefisto in Onyx" — were published in *Omni* while I was working there, and I had a hand in editing them. Not a big hand, but enough to make some readers feel a twinge of doubt. All I can say is that I thought these stories were wonderful at the time, and since they've held up in my estimation after years have passed, I don't think my judgment is skewed by what small role I had in their publication.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Moorcock's *War Amongst the Angels*, serves as a challenge to anyone who feels that literary experimentation only takes away from the power of the "story" (as if that thing could be in some way distinguished from the manner of its telling). The story of the wandering god-like Levendis and his whims of divine intervention wouldn't have half the power were it told in more straightforward form. In the hands of masters, the juxtaposition of disparate tones communicates something essential about the world which less daring narratives cannot grasp. One day Levendis raises everyone's IQ by 40 points, and on the next he lowers it by 42 points. On another he takes violent revenge upon racist skinheads who are beating up an interracial couple. He saves a 19th-century New York prostitute from syphilis so that she may bear a child who will save the lives of millions, and the next day causes a "fully restored 1926 Ahrens-Fox model RK fire engine" to appear in a minimall in Arkansas. As Jacobs does, Ellison vents his rage over injustices large and small without seeming to preach; he accepts the capriciousness of the universe while decrying the evils men do.

"Scartaris, June 28th" is a kind of sequel, a series of (mostly longer) episodes with the same divine trickster who is losing his taste for the game, but redisovers it at the end. It ranks with "The Man Who Rowed" as one of the two or three best Ellison stories of the past decade, and I think the form of both pieces says something about Ellison's work in that span. They're assembled of pieces, scenes too short or undeveloped to be whole stories in themselves but when assembled as parts of a larger vision become filled with extraordinary power. Several of the lesser pieces in *Slippage* — "Anywhere But Here, With Anybody But You," "Midnight in the Sunken Cathedral," "Go Toward the Light" — strike me as great beginnings of stories that either peter out or never take on that resonance of larger implication that makes "The Man Who Rowed" and "Scartaris" so effective. They might have been better off as parts of another such ensemble piece.

"Mefisto in Onyx" is a different sort of story altogether, told in a more conventional narrative form that fits it perfectly. It's the tale of Rudy Pairis, a well-educated but drifting black man who was born with the power to read people's minds, their "landscape" as he calls it. It's a power that has brought him mostly pain and isolation, since

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

even the best people, he's found, harbor secret thoughts and feelings you'd rather not know about. Rudy's drafted — by one of the few people he's close to, power lawyer Allison Roche — to plumb the mind of convicted serial killer Henry Lake Spanning, to see if he really committed the atrocious crimes for which he's been sentenced to die. And it's not just the hunger for the truth that drives Allison: she's in love with Spanning.

The plot itself, while gripping, isn't what makes the story's mark: it's the character of Rudy Pairis and the transformation he undergoes during the course of the tale. He's awakened from his wallowing in self-pity to reclaim command of his life. The magic is in the way Ellison walks the thematic line: Rudy's transformation in no way blunts his passionate feelings about the injustice of the world, no more than Levendis's whimsical use of his powers compromises the tragedy and cruelty of fate. As Zelazny and Lindskold do in *Donnerjack*, but with much more power and heat, Ellison simultaneously shows us the grim facts of life, rages at them, and tells us to stop whining and get on with things. That's the reality we've got to work with; make the best of it.

*Slippage* displays the essential benevolence that drives Ellison's famous fury: he's angry because he wants justice, he wants goodness to prevail, he wants the weak protected and the bastards hung from a tree — and he knows it won't happen, that in this real world bad guys get away. His remains a refreshing, sobering voice, devoted to the most honorable quest of the human heart: to accept the losses and injuries of life, the slippage, without giving up the determination to hold on to what you can. Raging at the dying of the light.

We need more voices like his.

BooksNow
**To order these books, (24hrs, 365 days) please call (800)266-5766 (Ext. 9500) or visit us at http://www.booksnow.com**

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

*Robert Taylor's first published story, "Idiot's Mate," was a finalist for the Nebula Award in 1968. He was born six days after H. G. Wells died, served in the Defense Language Institute during the Viet Nam war, and then was kidnapped by Martians in 1972. Nowadays he works as a computer technician in California. As of press time, the Martian embassy has not responded to our request for more information about the 1972 kidnapping, but surely they have a lot to do.*

# A Prisoner of History

## By Robert C. Taylor

THE EMPEROR CHANKRONDOR IV, when released from imprisonment, had bowed to his jailer, thanked him most politely for the hospitality displayed, and then, to show his own nobility and forgiveness, had the fellow elevated to the rank of Prison Master in the Royal Court. Trobar p'Arvellhion knew that he had no such royal perquisites to bestow upon his own jailers, but he had made up his mind that he would try to be at least as polite as the Emperor had been.

He was finding that hard to do. The outprocessing interview was dragging on, and the clerk who was conducting it seemed to have no intention of finishing it before the day was over. Outside the window of the cubicle, Trobar could see the shadows shift as the Star rose higher into the sky and then began its slow descent. The ships that rested on the landing field just beyond the prison fences now reflected the full glare of day off their silvery sides. The mountains on the other side of the red plain had been filled with deep shadows when the interview started. Now the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

shadows were filled with light, and the mountains themselves stretched out flat against the pale sky. The clerk went slowly over the papers while the present Emperor looked down upon him from the wall. He filled in blanks, checked boxes, occasionally asked a question. His pen scratched against the paper. Most of the time the only sound in the room was the quiet breathing of the two men, the shy hiss of the ventilation, and the scratching of the pen.

"We need to be thorough," the clerk had said at the start of the interview. "The Emperor Himself sometimes reviews these forms. We want to make sure that everything is correct."

He was very thorough, digging into all the facts of Trobar's life, his arrest, and his imprisonment. The detail of his investigation, as well as his patience, was astounding.

During the interview, Trobar learned two new things about himself, but after that he saw, with growing resignation, that the rumors were true and there was no hope that he would ever see Home again.

The first new thing he learned was that he had been convicted of belonging to a group that advocated the overthrow of the Emperor.

Trobar smiled feebly when he heard that. "It was just a lecture," he said. "I only knew one other person there, Chenkor p'Torlik. He invited me. I was an Historian, at the Imperial University in the Capitol. I had just received tenure. I specialized in the reign of Chankrondor IV. It was a lecture on the Republic, which preceded the reign of Chankrondor I. I didn't even hear the end. The police broke it up."

He sighed. It seemed so long ago now.

The clerk smiled at him again. "Surely, you should have appealed your conviction, that being the case. His Majesty's courts may make mistakes at times, but His Majesty Himself would have soon put things right."

"But I never even knew that a trial had taken place until I came here. I didn't even know what kind of meeting it was. Did I tell you that Chenkor p'Torlik invited me?"

The clerk looked down at the paper again. "Chenkor p'Torlik was the police spy who informed on all the members of the gang."

The clerk shrugged. There was, after all, not much to be done about it now.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The second new thing that Trobar learned was that he had been sentenced to fifty years of exile in the Penal Colony on T'arnp'ur, but that the sentence had been commuted to five years, with the right to become a citizen colonist at the end of that time.

"You will, of course," said the clerk, "receive the standard colonist bonus, if you should choose that honor." He looked down and continued filling out the form as he spoke.

"You may also," the clerk added, "elect to return Home on one of His Majesty's ships, provided you pay for the passage. The rate for that is —" He consulted a sheet of paper. "Oh, yes, here it is — five thousand Units."

Trobar looked at the clerk. "The only money I have is back Home. It was being held for me in the University Treasury."

The clerk shook his head. "Oh, no. You have nothing there. It was all confiscated by the Emperor. To pay for your trial, and your transportation here."

All the rumors, then, were true. No matter what sentence had brought you here, it was a life sentence. None, or few, were those who could afford to pay their way back Home — only those who had wealthy friends still in favor with the Emperor. Those were not likely to be here in the first place.

Trobar spread his empty hands before him. "Then I have no choice but to become a colonist," he said.

The clerk smiled again, and he also spread empty hands. "You are again a free subject of the Emperor. You may go where you want, if you have the means to get there. We will not force you to become a colonist."

"Then my only other choice is to become a freebooter."

The clerk slid a sheet of paper across to him. "That choice is yours. Please indicate what course of action you choose, and sign. After that, you are free to go. Your debt to the Emperor has been satisfied."

He looked out the window again. A haze of evaporating water that obscured the base of the mountains and a faint streak of green growth showed where the efforts of the prison workforce were beginning to bear fruit. That was the visible result of his own work. He looked down at his hands. They were scarred and calloused from the labor of the last five years. He could almost tell when each scar had been made. Previously, the hardest work his hands had known was the turning of pages of ancient

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

manuscripts. But everything he had done at the University was meaningless. Now, it was only the labor that these hands had done that had any reality. Everything else had been obliterated because he had gone to the wrong meeting.

He ran the pen down the lines on the page. Tears came to his eyes when he checked the entry that read *I accept the kind invitation of His Most August Majesty Chankrondor XXV to become a Citizen Colonist on the Colony World of T'arnp'ur.* His fingers were shaking so much that his signature wasn't even legible.

THE EMPEROR CHANKRONDOR IV, when released from imprisonment, had returned to his summer palace. There it was that the usurper Krandpot Ø and his highest ranking followers were being held in the deepest subdungeon by the commander of the loyalist troops, who had fought for the freedom of the Emperor. To show the fate of traitors, the Emperor had the River p'Er diverted so that it ran through the subdungeon. Then, for his loyalty, the Emperor elevated the commander to the rank of Viceroy and bestowed the palace upon him and his heirs in perpetuity. Trobar p'Arvellhion knew that he had no such royal powers, but he indulged himself for some little time in fantasies of what would happen if such powers were his.

There were fifty of them being outprocessed today from this particular prison compound. They walked out through metal fences, between rows of slitwire, past guards who held their silver slug-guns high. Each of the former prisoners wore a new suit of black cloth that had been supplied from the personal treasury of the Emperor. Already the suits were covered with a thin layer of red dust, the relentless gift of the desert to each of them. Trobar wondered how the Emperor Chankrondor IV had felt as he left his imprisonment. His eyes were caught by the eyes of the prisoners still inside, who stood against the metal fence, dressed in gray fatigues that were streaked with red. With their fingers caught in the meshes of the fence, they looked hungrily at the fifty men who trooped quietly to the waiting bus. They had worked hard all day out in the red waste. They waited for the dinner call, but were riveted now by this sight of former companions being taken to freedom.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Trobar could not look away from them even when he entered the bus. He found a window seat, and kept his face pressed against the plastic as they drove away. A few of the prisoners raised their arms to wave farewell, and Trobar waved back, though he knew they could not see. He himself had pressed against that fence, many times, watching the freedmen leaving, hoping that they were going Home as someday he would go Home, fearing that they were not.

The bus drove out past the landing field where the transport ships waited. They had come from Home, laden with supplies and new prisoners. Those who were released were replaced, then forgotten. The ships would leave, carrying produce and ores that had been transported hundreds and thousands of miles across the desert. No longer silver, but the same dull pink as the sky, the ships caught the last light of the Star. Soon, it would be night.

Trobar supposed that he would have to stop calling it the Star, now that he was a colonist. The prisoners all called it the Star, because the Sun was the fire that blazed in the skies of Home. But he would never see Home again. The bus was taking him farther away from Home than he had ever been before, to a colony settlement to the north. This planet, the Colony World of T'arnp'ur, was now home, and the Star was now the sun.

The driver of the bus was an old colonist. He told them stories as the night rose around them. In the darkness, the mountains and the horizon, and even the prison itself — everything fell away from them, leaving them in infinite space. The road led from nowhere to nowhere. Only the voice of the driver gave them something familiar to cling to. He had been transported fifty years ago, as a young man. Back then, when the colony was new, the prison sentences had been longer. He had served fifteen years before being allowed to join the colony.

"Not that the work was any easier," he said. "You couldn't tell the difference between prisoner and colonist by the amount of work done. You still can't. The work is hard, no matter which you are. For that matter, you might as well be a prisoner, for prisoners are fed even in the midst of famine, but as a colonist you've earned the right to starve along with the rest. Of course, you're given a quadrant of ground, and when you marry your wife's quadrant is joined to that and a third is thrown in as a bonus, and you get another quadrant bonus for each child born. There's some

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

consolation in that — wife and children to come home to after a hard day in the fields."

At the mention of marriage, the humor of the men began to pick up. They began to tell stories, make ribald jokes among themselves.

The old man laughed at them. "Hold yourselves together, for there'll be enough time for that. There's to be a Choosing when you arrive. You've not heard of that? You hear all the bad rumors, but not the good ones. Well, when new colonists come into a region, there's a festival. It's partly a leftover celebration of convicts rejoicing in one another's good fortune. But it's more than that now. All the Families bring out their sons and daughters, widows and widowers, and marriages are made. You don't have to, you know. You're free citizens, under the Emperor's bounty, and you can work your quadrant alone, if you so wish. But remember, wealth is power, here as it is anywhere, and here on T'arnp'ur, land is wealth. You're best off adding your quadrant in with a Family that's accumulated much already. Many quadrants and many hands to work them. That's the way to increase your wealth."

As the old man drove and talked, his voice slowly seeped into the bones of the freedmen, and soon they began to talk. In prison, they had always been furtive, as if they wanted to shield each other from the shame of being there. But now they began to talk of where they were from and what had brought them there. One was from Gwar, another from Locus, yet a third from Far Krelling. One had been sent for murder, another for insurrection, and a third for stealing a loaf of bread. They spoke of friends and family, wives and lovers, wealth and poverty, dreams and delusions, all left behind now, for best or worst.

One tall fellow, still just a boy, told how he had splashed paint all over the Emperor's portrait and been chased by the police for nearly two leagues before he was caught. "It was just a lark," he said. "I didn't mean nothing by it. My dad and me, we always stood up for the Emperor on Parade Day. He always said to me, 'Chengo, always praise the Emperor and give him honor.' It was just for fun. I didn't mean nothing by it."

The talk came to Trobar. Eyes turned to him, and he said, "I was an Historian at the Imperial University, in the Capitol. I specialized in the reign of Chankrondor IV. I had tenure. I could have become a Professor. But I was arrested for not knowing what kind of meeting I went to. Did

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I tell you that I had tenure?"

Everyone laughed at that, and Trobar did not feel particularly foolish, for if any of them had been wise they would not be here.

The Emperor Chankrondor IV, when released from imprisonment, had set to work reforming the administration of Law. He had established the Penal Colony system that had caused his Empire to grow in size and wealth, and had been able to pass his bounty down through his descendants, so that now the Emperor Chankrondor XXV ruled not only over Home, but three other planets as well. Trobar p'Arvellhion once had thought this a great and good thing.

Now he did not know how to feel about it. He laid his head against the window of the bus, staring out at the night streaming by, trying to imagine how it might have been, if he had turned down Chenkor's offer, gone back to work on that article for the *Royal Historical Journal* instead. He had worked hard to receive tenure, and with that behind him, the way was open for a professorship. Surely he would have been married by now. There had been several ladies who had their eyes on him, waiting for the time when he could relax from his studies long enough to contemplate the next move in his career. The dean's daughter had been interested in him. He remembered her as having a bright and pretty face. Perhaps children would have come by now. He did not know the proper timing of these things, but he could imagine himself with children now. For some reason, as he thought about it, he pictured himself with a daughter, with long golden hair, clutching his hand as they walked across the campus together.

He fell asleep with that image in his mind, and a deep sense of loneliness and loss within his heart. The bus plunged on, farther and farther into the wilderness.

Trobar woke deep in the night. He had been dreaming of his work as a prisoner, moving dust, tending seedlings, setting plants out in rows, digging wells and laying irrigation pipe. Alone, he hoisted the pipe, dropped it, and stood watching as water came flowing out, spreading like a lake, and the red dust began to turn green. Thirsty, he lay down to drink, and then awoke with his head against the plastic of the window. The bus jerked and the engine roared suddenly as the driver began shifting down

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and braking to a stop. Ahead of them in the road was a light, like a single star fallen to earth, waving back and forth.

"It's freebooters, lads," the driver grumbled. "Just do as they say and we'll all be well."

Everyone was silent as a man with a hood motioned them out of the bus with the muzzle of his slug-gun. It was not bright and shiny like the guns of the guards, but rather rusty and dirty. It might not even be able to fire, but no one wanted to find out. These were men who had grown used to obedience and passivity. They did what they were told, sullenly but silently. The gun was, perhaps, not even necessary.

They stood shivering in the cold of the night, as five hooded figures walked up and down the line they had formed. None of them knew what to expect from the freebooters. They had heard rumors of them — the proud, defiant ones who refused still to bow the knee to the Emperor, even after years of servitude, who refused the colonial offer and chose instead to roam the waste places of T'arnp'ur. How they lived, no one knew. Some, surely, roved as thieving bands. Others were said to have established their own settlements in canyons and valleys far from the colony settlements.

The man with the gun spoke loudly. "We're freebooters, men. No doubt you've heard of those like us. Don't be afraid of the hoods. We just wear them so you won't have to identify us during those times when we come to walk about in the colony. We're here to offer you a chance to join us. We won't take just any, but if you're what we need, we'll welcome you. We can't promise you much, yet, not even as much as the colony can — but we can promise that you'll never have to bow your knee to the emperor back on his dirt-ball. One day, after we've worked hard enough, we'll be able to kick him and his goons off this planet, and this'll be Home then. What do you say, men? You may think you're freedmen, but you're just trading slavery for slavery. Come with us, if you're what we need, and your children will be freeborn."

The four other freebooters walked along the line of men, talking with them, asking where they were from on Home, what they had done, and what they wanted now. One of them stopped in front of Trobar. "And what about you?" he said.

Trobar was eager to be wanted, to be needed. He had a sudden vision of himself with his knowledge helping to establish a new social order. "I'm

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Trobar p'Arvellhion, of the Imperial University in the Capitol. I had tenure. I'm an Historian, an expert on the reign of the Emperor Chankron — "

The man laughed. He turned and called out loudly to the leader, "Krate, this one's a bloody historian."

The freebooters all laughed. Their laughter was infectious. The men who stood waiting under the gun, eager for any sign of goodwill on the part of their captors, joined in. Even Trobar felt himself giggle. He felt suddenly very foolish for being an Historian.

Krate, the leader, looked over at him, shaking his head. "I'm sorry for you, Historian. You've come to a place where there is no history."

The Emperor Chankrondor IV, when released from imprisonment, had returned to his Summer Palace and set things right there, and then had gone on to the Imperial Palace in the Capitol and had set about from there to make things right in all his domains. He began with the government of his own life and his own household, and extended that to the government of the Lords and Ladies under him, and the Governors of all his provinces, in the hopes that, beginning with himself, the good results would filter down to the level of the common people. In the last days of his life, he had written a book filled with much wisdom. Trobar p'Arvellhion had once known all that book almost by heart. Now he found that he had forgotten all but one line: *"A man's history lies in his own hands; where he finds work for them is his home."* He kept whispering it to himself, over and over, but he could no longer remember what it had meant to him.

He rode the rest of the way to the colony settlement with his head leaning against the plastic of a window. It felt like there was nothing left to him. Ten men had gone with the freebooters. Five more had turned them down. Trobar had not even been asked. Night began to turn to morning, and still he did not sleep. His brain was silent. He stared out over the emptiness that was revealed when the sun began to rise. Quadrant after quadrant of red dust and emptiness went by outside. It was only later, at the very outskirts of the settlement, that any green began to break the monotony. Prisoners had first worked this land, breaking the ground up, digging wells, laying pipe, so that the green plants might begin to grow. After them, the colonists had come, and were now extending the work the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

prisoners had begun. A colonist himself, he would take the work further.

The festival, the Choosing, had already begun when they arrived. There were a few administrative buildings in the center of the settlement, and the people had come in from their quadrants and set up tents 'round about. The tents were great black things, decorated with brilliant banners. Colorful decorations were everywhere.

It was late morning when the bus arrived. The men stumbled out, tired and hungry, shy, not sure what to do. They did not know the rules of this new place, did not know how to fit in. They stood around the bus, grouped together, like a herd of wild cattle. People of the settlement came, took their hands and led them to a tent where they might live for the duration of the festival, until they had found suitable Choosings or decided to go off and work their quadrants alone. There were bunks in the tent, and trunks to store any belongings they might have acquired. They were shown the sanitary and shower facilities.

It wasn't necessary to show them a place to eat. All about them was drink and food, song and dance. They were surrounded by a festival to celebrate their release, to celebrate fresh life come into the colony, to celebrate new hands to help with the work.

Their hosts withdrew, and the men stood about, not sure what to do. Then one by one, or in small groups, they began to exercise their freedom. Some went out from the tent and were swallowed up into the swirl of the Choosing, others chose to rest on their bunks. Trobar lay down, and fell asleep. When he woke, the day was beginning to fail again.

Trobar sat on his bunk for a long time, not sure what he should do. He was alone. It was just as well. He didn't belong here. He wasn't sure where he really belonged. He tried to remember his room at the University, but he could only see his cell in the prison. Finally Chengo, the boy who had splashed the Emperor's portrait with paint, wandered in. He went over to his trunk, and searched around in it. He found what he was looking for, a book of some kind, and started to leave again. Then he saw Trobar. He smiled broadly.

"Come on," he said. "It's time to enjoy yourself."

"I'm not sure — " Trobar mumbled, but Chengo grabbed his arm.

"Come on," he said again. "You're free now. You've got to celebrate."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He dragged Trobar, still protesting feebly, out of the prisoners' tent and into another. People looked up as they entered, and moved toward them. Plates of food and cups of liquor were pressed into their hands.

"It's this way everywhere you go," said Chengo. "No one leaves you alone."

Around them, the people began to talk and ask questions. Trobar tried to ask the boy what they should do now, but the crowd separated them.

Trobar soon lost track of where he went and what he did. He found himself wandering from tent to tent, eating and drinking and talking. People crowded about him. Young girls watched him with glistening eyes. Mature women stood close, expectant. He was given food and drink. He found himself talking, telling about his life on Home, about the University, about the Emperor Chankrondor IV, about his arrest and his life in prison. Time and again, people clustered around him. They were at first eager to hear, but then lost interest and faded away. He moved on, or was whisked away, to another tent, and the whole scene repeated itself there. He realized, after a time, that he was being examined by different Families, being tried and found lacking.

There were a few faces that he seemed to recognize as he went from tent to tent. It was as if they were following him about. There was the face of a woman that he saw again and again. He saw her in one tent, then another, then he lost sight of her. He saw some of the men from the prison, and he saw some freedwomen. A bus had come from one of the women's prisons. Trobar saw them wandering around as dazed as the men, their hair shaved short.

Once again, he saw the face of the woman who had been following him. Surely just a coincidence, he thought. With such a party going on he was bound to run into the same people in more than one tent.

He started toward her, but music suddenly blared loud and a procession came through. Chengo marched at the head of it, dressed in a brilliant silver robe. A girl, younger even than himself, clutched one arm. Behind the couple came a band of people playing instruments, singing, dancing, throwing confetti and waving bright cloth in the air.

Chengo turned to Trobar as he went past. "I've been chosen," he shouted, and he clutched the arm of the girl tightly. She glanced quickly at Trobar, blushing and smiling, and then they all vanished away.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Darkness closed down around him. Trobar found himself wandering in the night, alone. There had been some fun, at first, in being the center of attention, but that had faded as rejection had followed rejection. Now he felt like getting away from all fellowship. He didn't really seem to be connected with his body anymore. He shuffled and stumbled, unable to control his legs properly. Somewhere between two tents, surrounded by music and voices, he stopped. He felt a dark misery bubbling up from within. He sat down and began to weep drunkenly. The weeping felt good, like a warm blanket about him. He had forgotten how good it could feel to get stinking drunk, to let the black memory of what he had lost pour down over him like water, and to weep and weep for what could not be regained. He clutched his misery tightly about himself, warmed himself with it, then let it drop to the ground as he drifted into sleep.

He woke before dawn with a sick feeling in his stomach and a pain in his head. There was just enough light to show that he was lying outside a tent, curled up on the ground. Someone had been kind enough to place a blanket over him. Rolling over on his back, he looked up at the sky. It was bright with lights. Sick, lonely, empty, he felt like a rock falling forever between those stars. He didn't know which one was Home. Maybe there was no Home. He had been rejected by all. The freebooters did not need him, and none in the colony seemed to want him. He did not know how long the Choosing would last, but he felt that he might wander through it until the end and not find any who needed a man who knew all about the Emperor Chankrondor IV, dead and dust nearly three thousand years now.

He started to rise, and felt pain shoot through his head. He clutched it with his hands and moaned.

A child's voice spoke from behind him. "Mommy said that when you woke up I should give you this."

Startled, he turned, and the pain made him moan again. The child came to him, and held an earthen flask to his lips. He tasted something that was sweet and bitter both.

"Mommy says to drink it all."

He took the flask in his hands and drank it all down. The taste made him shudder, but it eased the sickness in his stomach almost at once.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Mommy has me take it when I'm sick," said the child. "I think it tastes dreadful."

"Yes, it does," said Trobar. "Medicine often tastes dreadful."

The child was a girl. He was not good at guessing children's ages. She couldn't be much more than eight. Her hair was very blonde, and her eyes very blue. She gazed thoughtfully at him, as if he were some kind of animal she had never seen before. She seemed very much at ease with him, as if she didn't really know that he was a stranger.

"Mommy will be back soon," she said. "You were snoring while you slept. My name is Perr."

"My name is Trobar."

"We came from North Vale. Where did you come from, Trobar?"

He looked up at the sky. "I think I fell from one of those stars," he said. "I'm not sure which one. It was a long time ago, and I forgot to look while I was falling. I fell from a place called Home."

She giggled at that. "Home isn't up there, it's that way." She pointed out toward one of the horizons. "We'll be going home, in a few days, after the Choosing is over. Are you going home then?"

Trobar shrugged. "I'm not sure anymore where Home is."

Perr smiled. "I know where my home is." She looked past Trobar's shoulder and her smile grew broader. "Here's Mommy now."

Trobar turned to look. There was just enough light to see her as she made her way past the tents. He had seen her before. She was wrapped in a light blanket. Long, dark hair fell softly around her face and over her shoulders. Her eyes were dark in the fresh morning. He could not tell if she were young or old. She stopped, looking down at the man and the child. He could see her smile in the semidarkness.

Trobar stood, uneasy. He wasn't sure what to do with his hands. He clutched them behind his back.

"I saw you in several of the tents, last night," he said. "Who are you?"

"I am Anto p'Reth. How are you feeling?"

"Better. That remedy seems to have helped. I am Trobar p'Arvellhion."

"I know. You had tenure with the Imperial University, and were an expert on an early Emperor. I forget which one."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Chankrondor IV," said Trobar.

"Yes, Chankrondor IV. I've never learned about him. We know nothing here, except which crops to rotate in next, and how to find water where the sand is dark. I tried to follow you last night. I saw you in the tent of the p'Tanth Family. Like you said, we almost met in several tents. Then you disappeared, and I thought I had lost you. I found you sleeping here, almost by accident. I would have led you to a more comfortable bed, but you were asleep, and we're too far from my Family's tent. I couldn't carry you by myself, and I didn't want to disturb anyone else with the task, but I brought a blanket to help keep you warm. I've been making breakfast for you, while Perr kept watch."

"Thank you for the kindness. Why did you bother?"

She smiled again. "Historians are dense, aren't they. I didn't want to lose you so soon. It's in my mind to choose you, for myself, for Perr, for my Family. If you will have us. If you will have me."

Trobar gave a laugh. "I don't understand. Why would you want me? I know all about Chankrondor IV, but little else that's useful. I have been made to work these last five years, but I'm still not strong. I can give you children I suppose, and another quadrant, but there must be others who can do the same. What do you — "

She reached over and put a finger to his lips. "Hush," she said. "You protest too much. My Family is large and wealthy. We have many quadrants and many children and many hands to work. I am a widow; I have Perr. What I need, what my Family needs, is not the same as one just starting out. Our domains and numbers will increase, as they always have, but we need more than that."

She looked up at the sky, where all the stars moved silently.

"I want you to tell me about the Emperor, and about the others who sleep in the dust back on the world they called Home. I want you to tell me where we came from, and how we got here. I want you to tell me, and Perr, and all of our Family's children. And I want you to listen to the stories we tell you, so you can start weaving them together into stories that will pass down from us to our children and to the children of our children's children when we in our turn sleep in the dust."

The Emperor Chankrondor IV, when released from imprisonment — but Trobar p'Arvellhion had forgotten, for the moment, what the Emperor

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

had done.

He stood there in the predawn darkness, beside the woman and the child, underneath a sky full of stars that he had not been born to. Everything was very still, even the wind. He could almost believe that everything had been frozen like this since the world began, everything waiting for something to happen, so time could start moving again. The planet itself was stuck on its axis, and the Star refused to move any closer to day.

Trobar looked out past the tents that squatted on the red plain like great sleeping beasts. He looked out past the horizon. He could not see it, but he was able to look out over the road the bus had traveled, and out past the prison, to a field where bright silver ships waited to fly on stardust and fire to another planet that circled a distant star, a planet that the people who dwelt there called Home.

Once, Trobar had known everything there was to know about a man named Chankrondor who had lived on that planet. That had been a long time ago. Now, it seemed, he knew nothing. He held his hands up before him and studied once more the scars and calluses, the lines and cracks. Everything — all of Chankrondor's history, and all of his own history — it had all been taken away from him, by a foolish chance. But that was only a seeming, for he knew now that the Emperor had been right. His history was in his hands, and had been for the last five years. He had been making it as his hands had helped to shape this new world.

He dropped his hands, and with that gesture, time became unstuck and everything began to move again. The Star — no, the sun — began to poke above the horizon. Perr took one of his hands, and Anto took the other. They began walking side by side through the tents of the Choosing. Men and women were moving about, preparing for the day's festivities. Children were starting to run and play. Perr was talking, telling him about home, about her room, about the land and the crops and the animals. She talked about her grandmother and grandfather, and the aunts and uncles and cousins, and all the people of her Family. Trobar had yet no word for the relationships she felt, but she had many, and spoke of them dearly. With her voice, she wove a tapestry. As her words fell about him, Trobar felt himself woven into that tapestry, one small thread, together with skein after skein of other threads, all coming together into a whole that no one could see yet.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He had come to a place that was different from any he could have ever imagined. The freebooter had been right. This was a place where there was no history.

But there would be. It had already begun.

## Coming Attractions

There's a wonderful scene in the 1955 movie *Kiss Me Deadly* wherein the detective finally explains to Mike Hammer what's in that macguffin box: "Now listen, Mike," he says. "Listen carefully. I'm going to pronounce a few words, they're harmless words, just a bunch of letters scrambled together, but their meaning is very important. Try to understand what they mean." And then he reveals all we need to know.

Now listen, all of you. I'm going to write a few words: Cinema. Illusion. Moving pictures. La-la land. Magic.

Yes, that's right. Next month, *F&SF* is going to take you to the movies.

We'll go behind the camera with Richard Chwedyk in "Auteur Theory" as he gives us a director's tale of What Might Have Been. We'll go behind the scenes in Hollywood itself with Ron Goulart, who shows us what it *really* takes to get ahead in show business. We'll go back in time with Terry Bisson in his cinematic "Incident at Oak Ridge." And in the theater we'll get stuck sitting behind a guy with a bushy head of hair in Harvey Jacobs's "Goobers."

In addition, we'll have a film column or two...er, make that eight or nine. Joining Paul Di Filippo and Kathi Maio will be such fearless critics as James Morrow, Howard Waldrop, Pat Cadigan, and Ursula K. Le Guin, assaying such topics as what fantasy novels ought to be adapted into movies, what movies *never* should have been made, and who would make the best Brother Francis in *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. (Your editor's own suggestion of Paul Reubens for the role met with reminders of how I ought to treasure and preserve my day job.)

And finally, in the manner of classic film serials, I'll leave you with one cliffhanger for the issue: will the incomparable H. Ellison be on hand to bring us his own magnificent style of cinematic criticism?

Buy your ticket now and see.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

*Herbert Franke is one of Germany's leading science fiction writers, with numerous novels and story collections to his credit. Among his novels that have been translated into English are* Zone Null *and* The Orchid Cage. *The vivid short story that follows appeared in his first story collection,* Der Gruene Komet *(*The Green Comet*), but has only now been translated. It will be appearing soon in James Gunn's new anthology,* The Road to Science Fiction #6: Around the World, *but Jim was gracious enough to let us present it to you first.*

# The Building

## *By Herbert W. Franke*
## *Translated by Vernon Chamberlin; Adapted by James Gunn*

*Day by day automatons are taking our work away from us. After the 48-hour week came the 40-hour week, and after that will come the 30-hour week, the 20-hour week, and so on. What will people do in their free time? Something will have to be devised to keep people busy. Serious social politicians are wracking their brains to come up with answers.*

THE BLUE SUN HAD SUNK below the horizon; the red sun climbed triumphantly upward. Between them formed an enormous violet arch.

Underneath it Fontain marched in a column. Columns came from all directions, flexible gray rectangles that moved westward, toward the bridge that joined the city to the island. Police robots controlled traffic.

Fontain was a stone mason. His job was to arrange, one on top of another, the stones the carriers dragged to him from the fields. With a trowel he spread plastic mortar on the open surfaces and set the next stone on top.

No one spoke during work. Behind the rows of workers, robot

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

inspectors glided continually. People spoke to each other about it only in their free time — about the building they were constructing, how they would live in it, if it ever got finished, how pleasant everything would be then. Now their housing was barely sufficient, but once they were finished space would be abundant.

The building extended a long way in all directions. No one had ever seen the entire island. Although each of them was assigned a different work-place every day, none of the workers even had any idea what the ground plan for the building looked like. That was what the robots were for.

Generations had worked on the building, and now it might soon be ready. In ten years? Twenty? Fontain had once asked a robot inspector. That earned him three nights in unheated detention.

He stood upon the scaffolding and layered stone upon stone. Where he stood he could see far, yet he saw only gray walls, here higher, there lower. Everywhere the workers on their scaffolds were at their jobs. And below, the carriers with their large baskets hurried back and forth.

Ever since he could remember, he had been here every day, and he had never thought much about it. But now, as he secretly turned around and looked over the endless wall, the building suddenly seemed to him as something evil. A criminal thought shot through his mind: demolish these foundations, level these walls — and lead a carefree life in the old city. Conscious of guilt, Fontain turned to his stones and worked twice as hard.

The violet light above the city announced morning — the last red rays faded, the blue of the day spread out.

The people who lived in the city found themselves marching east — to the bridge, to the island, to their workplaces. What lay on the other side of the island, they didn't know. They didn't care. They didn't have time for that. When they came home from work in the morning, they were exhausted. They ate the food produced by the robot kitchens and fell into their beds.

Hassan was a worker. He chiseled stones from the walls. That was tiring labor, because the stones were mortared together with a substance as hard as glass. Still, it was better than being a carrier, who had to transport the heavy materials day in and day out to the rubbish heaps.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Hassan knew that he was doing important work and felt good about it. He didn't need the robot police who constantly watched the workers. Wherever they had placed him, he would have done his job, fulfilled his obligation. He squatted down on his scaffold and hit the chisel with his hammer, making it ring loud and clear. In his head was a dream, a hope for beautiful times, when the main square would be free of obstacles and the hydroponic gardens could be laid out. Now food was just enough to keep people alive, but when the hydroponic gardens were planted people would have more than enough to eat and drink.

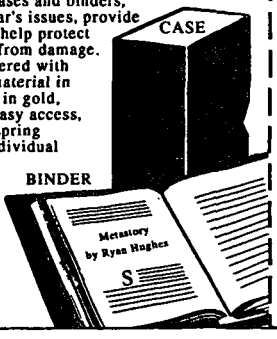
With an effort involving his entire body, Hassan broke loose a stone and lowered it in a receiving net. Immediately a carrier packed it into his basket.

Hassan wiped the perspiration from his forehead and looked over his wall at the indented edges of the other walls where his comrades were busy. How high had the building once been? A random impulse shot through his mind, an absurd idea, a vision, but it was frighteningly clear:

What if they were to build these walls further, higher and higher, into a gigantic, powerful, domineering edifice unifying everything and from whose towers one might view the entire island? Immediately, however, the ridiculousness of this flash of thought came clear, and Hassan again took up his chisel, still a little confused but without hesitation — with the certainty of a person for whom others do the thinking.


ORGANIZE AND PROTECT YOUR COPIES OF
Fantasy&ScienceFiction

Custom-made titled cases and binders, designed to hold a year's issues, provide the storage system to help protect your valuable copies from damage. Reinforced board covered with durable leather-like material in red, title hot-stamped in gold, cases V-notched for easy access, binders have special spring mechanism to hold individual rods which easily snap in.




Cases 1 — $ 8.95
3 — $24.95
6 — $45.95
Binders 1 — $11.25
3 — $31.85
6 — $60.75

Fantasy & Science Fiction
Jesse Jones Industries, Dept. 95 F&SF
499 East Erie Ave., Philadelphia, PA 19134
Enclosed is $_____ for _____ Cases.
_____Binders. Add $ 1.50 per case/binder for postage & handling. Outside USA $3.50 per case/binder (US Funds only) PA residents add 7% sales tax.

Print
Name _____
Address _____
No PO Box Numbers Please
City _____
State/Zip _____

CHARGE ORDERS (Minimum $15): Am Ex, Visa, MC, DC accepted. Send card name, #, Exp. date.
CALL TOLL FREE 7 days, 24 hours
1-800-825-6690

SATISFACTION GUARANTEED


LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

*"If I discovered a real dragon," says Mary Turzillo. "I'd convince myself that it was a gecko or a salamander. I mean, who wants to be labeled a nut?"*

*This editor does, that's who. But then again, I grew up in a household that encouraged a little nuttiness. In fact, for my seventh birthday I received a plaster cast of one of the dinosaur eggs discovered in the Gobi Desert. And I also received a certain novel by Mr. O. Butterworth to which "Chrysoberyl" pays homage delightfully. (You can look up the book—I'm pleased to report that it is still in print.)*

# Chrysoberyl

## By Mary A. Turzillo

GINNIE LABELED THE PATIENT file, "CHRYS — winged iguana? Owners: Jessica and Tod Fithian." She leaned back in the creaky old office chair — her down payment on this farmhouse where she set up her new veterinary practice had left her little money for fancy furniture — and gave the Fithians what she hoped was a sage and professional look. The three, father and two kids, were new people, part of the invasion of yuppies into this old farm community.

"We have to get rid of it," said Mr. Fithian. His nine-year-old daughter Jessica, who smelled of grape bubble-gum and baby shampoo, was clutching Chrys tearfully. "I'd turn it over to the Animal Protective League, but — "

Ginnie held her arms out for the lizard. "Does it eat anything besides kittens?" Chrys, warm and surprisingly light despite its distended abdomen, came to her and fastened its claws in her sweater. It smelled like soap and charcoal. In the spring sunshine streaming through the panes of wavy glass, its abdomen was gold, its top parts green as new grass.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"He only ate the kittens by accident," Jessica said, all belligerent defense. "We feed him mice and hamburger now."

"He toasts them himself," said Tod. Tod was six, and imaginative.

"Ha ha," said Ginnie, sorry for Tod, who was losing his pet.

The truth was, she had no idea what Chrys was. When her receptionist had ushered the Fithians into the high-ceilinged farm dining room which she had converted into a treatment room, she had thought it was an iguana. But it was the biggest iguana she had ever seen.

Not to speak of the wings.

"In your own words, kids, tell me where you found it," Ginnie said. The lizard (she refused, just yet, to call it a dragon) flicked its tongue out and licked her jaw. Its gaze fastened on her, like a puppy in love.

"We were out at Nelson Ledges," said Jessica. "Just climbing around, and we went in this big dark cave." Nelson Ledges was a local park featuring sandstone caves, once a lovers' hangout for the teen children of farmers, now an attraction for family picnics.

"It was way deep!" Tod added.

"Shut up, Tod, let me tell it," said Jessica. "Okay, we were back in the cave and we heard something moving, so I took out my flashlight that I got for Girl Scout camp — "

"My flashlight, not your old stupid Girl Scout light."

"He's stupid," said Jessica. "Anyway, we shined the light in the corner, and it was moving, like the dirt was heaving up."

"She was scared," said Tod. "I wasn't scared, but she was."

"*Shut up!* Anyway, Doctor Ginnie, I started digging to see what it was — "

"Just like kids, no caution," said Mr. Fithian.

Jessica rolled her eyes. "And we dug out this pretty egg."

"It was way big!" said Tod. "And it was green with brown speckles, and it was shaking!"

"So anyway," said Jessica, ignoring Tod, "I wrapped it in my Girl Scout jacket and we took it to the car."

"They didn't let on they had it," said Mr. Fithian.

"Describe the egg," said Ginnie, avoiding Mr. Fithian's gaze.

Mr. Fithian looked sternly at his children. "When we got home, they hid it, but I knew something was up. It wasn't a bird's egg. Seven inches

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

long. Rubbery. And something was trying to get out. I let them use a knife — "

"And we cut it a little and this little *dragon* flops out! He was all slimy and his tongue hung out and his eyes were closed and he was panting like anything and — "

"They didn't know what to do," said Jessica, "but in my Girl Scout meetings they told us to keep little animals warm, so I put some baby blankets in the carton my in-line skates came in — "

"And when he got too big you brought him to me," said Ginnie. The lizard — or whatever — was now a plump yellow and green creature, with membranous wings that folded almost like a geisha's silk fan on either side of its spine. And it had eaten the neighbor's kittens.

"They named him Chrysoberyl," said Mr. Fithian.

"That's a green gemstone," said Jessica.

Fithian looked tired. "He eats five pounds of raw beef, once every nine days. He sleeps a lot after that, but when he's active he can be a real pain." Reluctantly, he reached over and scratched Chrys's crest.

Ginnie carried the lizard across the room, the uneven floorboards creaking underfoot, and hoisted it onto the stainless steel examination table. It immediately tried to scramble back into her arms. "Sorry, baby," she said. "I'm still trying to figure out what you are." Ginnie was used to a variety of patients. She did treat the occasional barnyard animal, though most farmers were loyal to old Dr. Newton in the Falls. But the suburbanites, who supplied most of her patient load, sometimes chose exotic pet-store beasts: pythons, chinchillas, pygmy hedgehogs. "Can you tell what he is from the X-rays?" Fithian asked.

Ginnie sighed. "Not really. I need to do some research."

Chrys's temperature was a steady 102.5°. Hot for a lizard. Its heart — or hearts, because she suspected it had another one at the base of its spine — beat at about 120 a minute. Thank God it wasn't sick. Doctoring lizards was always chancy, and who knew how this one would respond to standard iguana treatment?

"Has he flown yet?"

Fithian glanced nervously at his children. "Well, that's a problem. He does, and he's fond of birds."

"He ate a robin," said Tod.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"But we told him he was only allowed to eat pigeons and crows, and he's been good since then," said Jessica.

Fithian rolled his eyes.

"I could keep him," said Ginnie.

"You realize, Chrys," she said, when they were alone, "you aren't allowed to eat people's kittens."

Chrys stared at her adoringly. He had topaz-yellow eyes with slit pupils, like a cat, but somehow he managed to convey doglike devotion with them.

"Your former master Mr. Fithian is a widower. Wish I had the nerve to flirt with him," she said. She was accustomed to discussing her problems with the livestock, and she figured Chrys wouldn't betray any confidences. "You'd think in a profession where men outnumber women five to one I'd be Ms. Popularity. I bet I'm the only veterinarian in my graduating class that doesn't have a spouse and kids by now."

Chrys flap-clawed his way into her lap and licked her chin.

"You stop that! Want some hamburger? God, how am I going to feed you? I wonder if Alpo makes dragon kibble?"

Chrys looked small and lonely in the big farmhouse dining room. He leaned his head against her bosom.

"You're kinda cute," she said. "I guess somebody loves me."

Ginnie closed her rural veterinary clinic on Wednesdays, so that seemed like a good day to take Chrys up to the Natural History Museum in the city for an opinion as to his species and proper care.

With a touch of apprehension, she arranged a nest for Chrys in her station wagon. It was a good hour's drive to the museum. She hoped she could get him in a safe cage, but if he would just ride beside her, that was okay.

And he disappeared.

"Come out of there or I'll make a pair of boots out of you!" she yelled down the basement stairs. The basement smelled wet and very old, which it was. She poked every spiderwebbed cubbyhole with a broom, shone the light into every musty crack.

"Oh my God! I bet he ate Mrs. Begezda's cockapoo!" Ginnie flew back upstairs and did a quick count of the patients. None were missing.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

At four thirty, Chrys sauntered into Ginnie's apartment, above the clinic. He placed his front paws on her lap, folded his wings back, and stared soulfully into her eyes.

"Where *were* you?"

Chrys jumped up in her lap, a chubby bundle of love, then jumped down and began clawing at the chipped enamel of the refrigerator door.

"Now it's too late to take you to the museum! No! No more hamburger! I don't even know if it's good for you."

She worked up her nerve to call and make another appointment. In preparation, she took pictures of Chrys in case he pulled another disappearing act.

Which he did.

GINNIE WORE her best jeans, a pretty blue blouse, and jade pendant. She felt a nice appearance would lend credence to her tale, undergirded by the photos. She drove through farm country mixed with new housing developments, then through city streets, into University Circle with its venerable stone edifices, and, screwing her nerve up, penetrated the hidden labs of the museum.

"Hey, these are great!" said Dr. Beasley, the head of the reptile division. They were in a large, cluttered preparation room gloomy with late afternoon sunlight streaming from windows high in the wall through dust particles suspended in the air. His assistant peered over his shoulder. "How did you do that? Is it supposed to be a pterodactyl? Cause if it is, you got the wings wrong, and it has too many — "

"He's alive," Ginnie said. "Some kids brought him in. He hatched out of an egg they found at Nelson Ledges Park."

"Ha, ha, that's great," said Dr. Beasley. By this time a small crowd had gathered around the black table where Ginnie had spread the photos.

"Could you do some displays like this for our fall dinosaur display? We could talk about budget later," said the Special Projects director, Dr. Zinsmeister.

"He's not a model, he's real," Ginnie said. Her voice didn't carry very well.

"Give me a number where we can reach you. Anybody that can put

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

something like this together, we can use. You ever volunteer here before?"

"I don't think it looks real," said a snotty-looking blond man.

"Come on, Phil," said Zinsmeister. "The anatomy is off a little, but I'm sure she can fix that up."

"You want to see the X-rays?" Ginnie asked softly. She pulled them out of an envelope and shyly passed them to Beasley.

"Hm," said Beasley. "That's a cute idea, too. Hoke it up so the kids can imagine the fossil skeleton is an X-ray."

"They're real," said Ginnie. But her mouth was so dry nobody heard her.

Almost in tears, she gathered her photos and fled into the dark hallway flanked by faded window displays of stuffed birds.

One of the volunteers, an Asian man of about thirty, came up beside her. "I'll walk you to your car," he said. "There've been some muggings in the parking lot."

Ginnie was too miserable and embarrassed to say anything, but she let him follow her through a maze of offices and labs, into the display rooms, and out the public entrance of the building to the lot where her rusty Ford station wagon was parked.

"Don't mind Phil," said the young man, "He's a pain."

Ginnie suddenly became aware of the fact that the Asian man, standing there with the breeze ruffling his dark hair, was quite cute.

"Well, here's my car," she tried to say, but her mouth was so dry nothing came out. She yanked on the car door several times before she remembered the locks were broken and she had to climb in through the tailgate. She managed a sickly grin and opened the rear door, hoping the young man would go away before she had to go through the ignominy of crawling in on hands and knees.

The young man lingered. His eyes were brown-black and suggested a playful nature. She wished he'd leave.

"Those photos were real, weren't they?" he said.

"Yes. That's what I was trying to say." Caught off guard, Ginnie discovered she could speak.

"How do you think the egg got in that cave?"

"That's what I was hoping they'd help me find out."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"But they had to act like airheads. Hm. I would love to see your dragon."

He called Chrys a dragon, thought Ginnie.

The young man said, "My name's David Yin. I'm a grad student in geology. May I drive out to your clinic and see the dragon?"

"I — uh suppose." Ginnie's voice was drying up again.

"Fine. Tell you what. I'll take you to dinner."

"Oh, I'm sorry, that would be absolutely impossible. I'm tied up for the next two decades," said Ginnie. Or tried to say. Actually, her voice failed completely. David Yin smiled and shook her hand. His own hand was warm and strong.

Ginnie could hardly breathe.

A week later, David turned up at the battered screen door at the rear entrance of the clinic with a chuck roast and a camera.

Ginnie was wearing a gray sweatsuit with dachshund vomit on it. Her glasses had been repaired with a twist-tie and her socks didn't match.

"Where's the dragon?" David said, closing the screen door gently behind him. "I brought him a present." He plopped the roast on the exam table and started unwrapping it.

"How did you know where to find me?" Ginnie tried to ask.

"Ancient Chinese secret. Phone book." David peeked around the door of the examination room. "You let him run free?"

"I think he's in the basement."

"Does he like beef?"

Ginnie led David down the creaky stairs into the basement, which smelled and felt cold as a cave. "Chrys," she called into the dimness of the light shed by one naked bulb. She kicked a cat collar off the broken bottom step. "That's funny. He usually comes running when I call."

David bent over and picked up the cat collar. "Did you lose this?"

The cat collar was a gold anklet.

She shook her head; she didn't recognize it. "Chrysoberyl," she called. "A nice man wants to see you. He has a treat."

The single bulb went out. "Dam! Must be a breaker. Let me get a — "

A ferocious growl blasted them.

David grabbed her hand. "Was that — ?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Out of the dank shadows a flaming shape erupted. It rushed straight at them, flapping huge wings *WHOOSH WHOOSH WHOOSH* and screaming *YEEEOWRRR*. Ginnie pushed David up the stairs and scrambled after him. She slammed the door behind them and shut her eyes.

When she opened them, she saw that David's shirt was torn, burnt, and covered with blood. "Oh, no! Chrys has never done anything like this before." She pulled David into the smaller treatment room that she had created from the farmhouse pantry, opened the shirt, and examined the three parallel gashes in his chest. "I'm so sorry!" Shakily, she cleansed the wounds, applied antiseptic, and bandaged them.

"I just had a tetanus booster," David said, grinning and following her back into the lab. "Geologists have to be careful."

"But what about other diseases? Oh, God, Komodo dragon saliva is actually toxic!"

"Now, now," said David. "That obviously was not a Komodo dragon. How does he react to your other patients?"

"You mean the animals, or their owners? He's sweet as a kitten. People come here just to pet him. I've doubled my practice since I adopted him. Oh, Mr. Yin, I'm so sorry."

"*Mister* Yin? I hope you get over that before dinner's over."

Ginnie was suddenly aware that she was standing alone in her kitchen-turned-veterinary-lab with an attractive man who was naked to the waist. She blushed.

David cocked his head and looked at her. "You're bashful, aren't you?"

Ginnie felt the blush travel all the way down her neck, over her body, to her fingertips. "No," she said. But her voice was gone.

"Well, that's okay," he said. "Could you lend me a shirt?"

Wordlessly, Ginnie dashed upstairs into the rooms she had made into her apartment and grabbed an oversize flannel shirt. On the way past her bedroom mirror, she noticed what a mess she was. She pulled off her dirty sweatsuit, pulled on a cotton sundress, yanked a comb through her hair, and jabbed her contacts in. No time for makeup.

David was listening intently at the basement door when she returned. "He's making whuffling noises," said David. "Like he was crying. You think he's jealous?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

* * *

When Ginnie, sated with Turning Leaf Merlot and penne with clam sauce, returned that night, Chrys galloped up the rickety stairs and laid his head in her lap. He made small whining noises.

"Bad dragon! Bad!" she said. "What is wrong with you? Are you turning into a mean adult?"

Chrys was now as tall at the shoulder as a German Shepherd, so she was glad she had drawn the line by not allowing him in bed with her. She already had two cats, a mutt, and a lop-eared rabbit to snuggle with.

The next morning she explored the basement, using a powerful flashlight to pierce the ancient gloom. Chrys had created a nest for himself on the dirt floor — out of junk jewelry. He had settled himself in the middle of it, and he raised his head inquiringly when she found him.

"You insane animal!" Apparently the cool metal must feel good to him. She wondered: perhaps he had a hot spot on his breast, like many birds, which made him want a cool egg underneath. Or cool metal.

He had nice taste, too. The jewelry was pretty. She felt guilty allowing him to keep it, but of course it was just costume junk despite whatever sentimental value it might have to its owners. And how would she ever find out who it belonged to?

DAVID CALLED, this time to make an appointment for a friend's ferret, which needed to be neutered and descented. He arrived in a little red Honda, tires crunching on her new gravel parking strip.

Ginnie felt apprehension as she watched him drive up. On the one hand, he made her feel almost comfortable. On the other, she was impossibly awkward in front of men. They always saw right away that she was a complete nerdess (the feminine of nerd, in OSU veterinary school slang), and left her alone.

But she was dressed to kill this time. Silk shirt to match her jade pendant. New jeans with little zippers on the pockets. Contacts *and* eye makeup. She need only whip off her lab coat to be ready to impress him.

That was, if she could work up her nerve to open the door.

Recklessly, she figured she would go out into the driveway and welcome him.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Oh, hi!" he said, smiling casually. "The ferret's in the back seat."

Also in the back seat was a box of rocks and a kit of tools. The ferret's beady black eyes fastened suspiciously on Ginnie as she lifted it out of its box, holding tight to its leash. "Is that Chrys up on the roof?" asked Dave as they walked to the clinic door.

Chrysoberyl was crouched on the high, gingerbread dormer, wings in menacing half-spread position like a vulture over prey. His eyes were full of fire and his lips drawn back in a snarl. She could hear the ancient roof slates cracking under his weight. He shifted from one foot to the other and leaned forward.

"Look out!" Ginnie screamed, almost too late.

"*YEEEORRWLLLL,*" screeched Chrys, and swooped down at them. Ginnie instinctively shielded the ferret with her body, but she could feel the breeze from Chrys's wings on her back.

"Good lord," said David, getting slowly to his feet. "I don't think your buddy likes me."

"I didn't realize he could fly at that weight," said Ginnie.

David brushed grass and dust off her shirt. "Take the ferret inside. I have a feeling I'm not wanted in there."

Ginnie almost burst into tears.

Dave laughed. "But you come back out. I want to look at the cave where you say Chrys's egg came from."

The ferret, a hysterical lightning bolt of fur, was put into a cage in the kitchen-turned-lab in readiness for its procedure the next day. Ginnie and Dave spent a satisfying evening exploring Nelson Ledges. Ginnie led him to the cave where she believed the Fithians had discovered Chrysoberyl.

"Interesting," said Dave. "It looks like there might have been a nest of some kind here, arranged like hadrosaur eggs. But it's hard to tell. I'd have to excavate the whole area, maybe do castings."

They ate curly-fries and cave-dogs at a stand near the park.

By the end of the evening, they were holding hands.

Ginnie couldn't believe it. "You seem to like me," she whispered.

"You're cute, and bright, and you've got a kind heart," said Dave. "Most people would try to put that dragon into a cage instead of giving it free access to their home."

"I don't think you should come in," she whispered. She glanced

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

significantly at the high roof of the clinic. Back-lit by the moon was the brooding figure of the dragon.

"Now look," she told the dragon some days later. "You're getting too big for this behavior. Dave's the only one you don't like. What's wrong? He's a nice guy. He's trying to help me figure out what you are."

Chrys looked at her with sad, loving eyes. He didn't have to look up at her anymore. He was now as tall at the shoulder as she was. Had to be supplementing his diet, she thought. Maybe on stray cats, road-kill, or — heaven forbid — local farmers' chickens and ducks. The side of beef she bought from a neighboring farmer had lasted less than a month.

"And you've got to stop stealing junk jewelry!" The heap in the basement was growing. She got the Fithian children to go down with a flashlight to see if they recognized any missing property, but Chrys just plopped himself on top of it and refused to move. He did roll over on his back and allow his belly to be scratched, but he wouldn't get off the treasure-trove until they left.

"I know I'm fooling myself," she said, stroking his crest. He closed his eyes dreamily. "You have to be a dragon. That's what you are. But dragons are a myth. So — what are you?"

"Where's your jade pendant?" asked Dave, the next time they met.

Her hand stole to her throat. The ribbon was still around her throat, but the pendant was gone. "Oh, no! This time that pesky dragon has gone too far!"

"Listen, I'm worried about you. We don't know what's going on in that reptile's mind. If he developed an antipathy like that to me, what might he do to you?"

"I thought dragons were good luck."

"Oriental dragons. Chrys is clearly a St. George-type dragon."

"What should I do with him? Sell him to the knackers for dog food?"

"I don't know. Try to get Beasley to look at him again."

"In your car, or mine?"

Dave laughed and kicked at a rock. "Well, maybe I could talk Beasley into coming out here."

"Chrys would hide," she said miserably.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"He's hard to conceal these days. He's the size of a pony."

"But not as heavy. He can still fly, and he'd just flap away and lurk in somebody's barn until Beasley went home."

"And you don't think he's dangerous?"

"Not to me. He loves me."

"Because you're a virgin?"

Ginnie felt the world tilt. Her face went hot and red. "Yes."

Dave smiled, then went serious. "Have you ever thought why dragons love virgins?"

"It's like unicorns," she said. But she knew that wasn't so. "Or maybe they identify with virgins because dragons can reproduce by parthenogenesis. Isn't that part of the myth?"

Dave stopped in the pathway and held her hand. His eyes lost their customary playfulness. "Or — maybe he's just waiting until he's big enough to eat you."

Ginnie decided she was in love with Dave. He was sweet, smart, funny, kind, and good-looking, too.

But it was a triangle. Chrysoberyl loved Ginnie; Ginnie loved Dave. And Chrysoberyl was growing.

Winter came, and Chrysoberyl perched on the roof in driving sleet, or went for longer and longer flights. Ginnie would sometimes catch glimpses of him soaring over snow-covered cornfields or the rooftops of new housing developments, his great wings beating the air like the fins of a manta ray. He was glorious, he was huge, and he was a complete mystery.

He still returned to the clinic, although now she had to trudge into the snow-drifted back yard to pet him. His warm breath melted the snow on her lashes, and his tongue felt like a big hot towel. "Chrys, are you going to eat me?" she asked him. "Would you let me ride your back, like a dragon in those science fiction novels?"

He still guarded the farmhouse and refused to let Dave into the downstairs clinic or the upstairs apartment.

And he was still able to crawl through the storm cellar doors into the basement, to guard his hoard. Anytime Ginnie brought anyone to look at

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the jewelry, he scrambled down the outer steps instantly, as if he smelled the intruder, and fended them off.

"He needs a mate," said Dave shortly.

"*You* need a mate," said Ginnie.

"You've really come out of your shell, haven't you?" asked Dave, scowling down his nose at her. He kissed her, and pulled her down in the snow with him.

"Bad! Bad geologist!" she said, laughing and washing his face with snow.

"Good geologist," he said. "Let me show you how good."

And then Chrys flew away, and didn't come back.

"So what do we do now?" she asked Dave. For the first time since she had met him, they were seated in the small kitchen she had made out of the farmer's bedroom, drinking mulled cider and eating cheesecake. One of the cats was sitting on Dave's lap; the bunny was chewing his shoes.

"Well, you could put an ad in the Crops and Shops section of the *Country Herald*. Unless you feel you're well rid of him."

She suddenly felt bereft. "Don't say that! He was a sweet dragon."

"If he *was* a dragon. I only saw him a few times. Maybe we hallucinated him."

"He was real!" She burst into tears. "The Fithian kids saw him. Lots of my patients' owners came and petted him."

"I guess he was real, then." Dave leaned over and stroked her hair.

"I can't put an ad in the paper. 'Missing: ten-foot-long dragon, green with gold belly; eats livestock and Chinese geologists.' Give me a break."

One afternoon Dave gave her a news clipping from the Cleveland newspaper. It was a photograph of a gargoyle on a church in Ohio City, and sitting next to the gargoyle —

"Good Lord! That's Chrys!" said Ginnie.

The snapshot, taken by a seventh grader, had won first prize in a photo competition.

A few months later, she got a letter from Tod Fithian.

"Deer dr Ginnie, can I take some pichurs of Chrys? My sister says we

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

can sell them to *Ranger Rick*. P.S. I saw him flying up over the lake but he wood not come to me darn it."

Twice as many UFO sightings were reported in Northeast Ohio as usual that year.

"Geese," explained an official source at Lakefront Airport.

Ufologists connected the sightings with the disappearance of cattle, sheep, and watchdogs, hinting of weird alien experiments.

"Careless hunters," explained the agent at the Agriculture Extension Service.

Mrs. Begezda, picking her cockapoo up after Ginnie had cleared up yet another gum infection, stopped short as she was walking out. "Whatever happened to that big lizard you had here?"

"It flew away. Every so often somebody reports seeing it, but it just — flew off." Ginnie's voice quavered a little.

Mrs. Begezda pursed her lips reflectively. "Do you know where I could get one like that for my grandson?"

The night before she married Dave, Ginnie had a dream. She was a girl again, maybe twelve years old, the age at which she had first discovered how she could indulge her love of animals all the rest of her life without being thought a loony. It was a wonderful revelation; she would be an animal doctor. She would save premature puppies and cats that had been hit by cars and horses with mysterious diseases. And she could keep as many pets as she wanted: snakes and turtles and goats and jerboas.

In the dream, she was climbing the highest tree in a stand of maples. Around her, the wind sighed and birds queried her presence. But she climbed upward, finding more and more precarious handholds, until she came out of the luminous green leaves into the sunlight. She looked down at a forest filled with life.

And a great bird beat its wings, soaring out of the sun. It was flying toward her, to bear her higher still.

Then she woke up, and it was time to put on her wedding dress.

That fall, just after Ginnie's amniocentesis revealed she was expecting a daughter, Dave decided to clean the eaves out. He came down the ladder, his face smeared with leaf-mold. "Chrys has been here," he said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"He has? How do you know?"

"She. And I know because she left you a present."

Ginnie climbed the ladder, her abdomen bumping awkwardly against the rungs, and found the egg in an angle of the eaves between the porch and the main part of the clinic. It was green and brown, half covered with leaves. Parthenogenesis? Or had there been other eggs in that cave nest at Nelson Ledges?

And underneath, among the leaves, was her jade pendant, cool and smooth. She held it up for Dave to see.

He laughed. "The little — er, big — thief brought it back!"

"And what about the egg? Can it be a gift?"

"More a way of Chrys asking us to raise her daughter with our own."

"I would never — after the way she treated you?"

"Oh, I suppose brute instinct convinced her I was her rival. But in the long run, she was what brought us together, you know."

"Oh, what hogwash! I should give this egg to the Natural History Museum." Ginnie held the pendant up to the sun, so that it glowed green, with flaws sparking golden lights, like Chrys's eyes. In her heart she knew they would never, never give the egg up. They would have to be very careful, of course, but they would hatch the new, tiny dragon.

And perhaps it would bear gifts to her daughter that, at this moment, she couldn't even imagine.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

*"Hi there! I've been sent to be your guardian angel!"*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

*Barry Malzberg and Batya Yasgur have collaborated on a score or so of stories in the past few years. This new tale posits a visitation much like one of old, but with very different results from any other fables you might recall.*

# Job's Partner

## By Batya S. Yasgur & Barry N. Malzberg

THERE WERE THREE OF THEM — a tall one, and two shorter ones — and they appeared to Judith in the Day Room, where she was gazing through the barred windows, trying to figure out how to cajole Diana, the 8-4 nurse, into returning her knitting needles so she could finish the sweater for Baby.

When she saw them, her veins ran ice and her bile bubbled up, burning her throat, like those early days of empty-bellied morning sickness.

"Go away," she hissed. "You've gotten me into enough trouble already."

"Not until you say yes," the Tall One said — or radiated. Mouthless, faceless, he couldn't speak, perhaps, but his words entered her consciousness effortlessly, automatically. She, on the other hand, had to speak aloud, as if talking to ordinary human beings.

"I'll never do it." Her skin was goosebumpy, and she clutched the window bars.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Let's discuss it reasonably." One of the Short Ones glided forward until it was almost touching her knee.

She flinched and jumped back, glancing around nervously. Joan and Nicole were squabbling over the television as usual, Francis holding court with Queen Elizabeth and Samantha dancing for an imaginary audience.

"Not here." She motioned to them. "Let's go into the Quiet Room."

The Quiet Room was where you could go to be alone — voluntarily, not like Seclusion. It was carpeted, padded, soundproof. She lumbered down the hall, the Beings gliding noiselessly behind her.

"Okay." She lowered herself to the floor gracelessly, easing her swollen belly along. "Why can't you leave me alone?"

"We want the baby." The vibrations were stronger and she was shaking from them, the infant within tossed in the whirlwind of amniotic fluid.

"No!" she shouted, backing into a corner, huddling into it, as in womb.

"What's going on in here?" It was blonde Diana, passing in the hall, crisp and starched in her white uniform.

"N-nothing," she called back, her voice an assemblage of artificial breeze and cheer.

She turned back to them. "What are you trying to do? Get me sent to seclusion?"

"We're not trying to do anything to you." The Tall One spoke with assurance and authority, the calm of one clearly used to being in charge. "Except we want you to agree to give us the baby after he's born."

"He? How do you know?" She gazed at her belly, moving with the movements of the baby.

"We see through solidity, unlike you humans. We pass through solidity — that's how we got in here. We aren't limited by your physical laws."

"Or our emotional ones."

The Tall One's movements resembled a shrug. "True. But we are not devoid of compassion either."

"Compassion?" She laughed bitterly. "And you persecute me like this? Get me sent to a nuthouse because no one will believe me about you?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"We'll leave you alone when you promise us the baby."

Baby. Crowing and capering and bouncing around her belly, regaling her with little internal kicks. Baby — soon to appear (next month), its pudgy fists dimpling as they closed over her finger, tiny lips pulling eagerly on her breast, amid tiny contentment noises. She cradled her belly.

"What do you need a baby for?"

A trio of sighs. Why, she wondered, did all visitations come in threes? Angels to Abraham, shepherds to Mary, Trinity to Paul? Three wishes. Three Wise Men.

"We've been through all this already," the Tall One said, ripples of trembling light cascading toward her.

"No we haven't."

"All right." Another sigh as the Tall One seemed to settle back on formless haunches. "Your people are destroying the Earth. Holes in ozone, poisons on plants, smog hugging your cities. Your race will not survive. Your planet will be annihilated. So — the baby. We will raise Baby. Teach him all we know. Return him to Earth when he's grown. As long as there is one among you who possesses our secrets, your planet will survive."

"I don't get it." She hid her face in her hands, tears scalding her fingers.

"It's no reflection on you," said one of the Short Ones kindly. "Your race is significantly lower in intelligence than most of the others in the galaxy."

She glanced up quickly. "How do you know?"

The Tall One laughed — droplets of mirthful light bouncing off walls and floor. "We are the Doers of Giving on our Planet. It is our sacred task to travel to distant galaxies, rescuing inhabitants from their own follies."

"Sort of like interstellar Boy Scouts? Or Social Workers?"

"Something like that."

The tears winked in the light, casting little splotches of rainbow across the diabolically green floor. "But why my baby? There's a nursery in Building B — across the hall, down the elevator, through the courtyard, up to second floor, I had my other kids there — and you'll see lots of babies. Rows and rows of babies, all snug and neat in their little plastic cribs. Just help yourselves and leave me alone."

"And leave some bereaved mother to go to pieces when she finds out her child has been abducted?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What about *me*?" The cry burst forth, as the waters would burst forth from her womb next month — but foul, stinking waters, prelude to stillbirth and death.

"You'll never worry, where is my child? You'll know."

"No!" She rocked back and forth, balancing her belly awkwardly between her legs. "Why? Why choose me? There are millions of other women in the world who are pregnant!"

The Tall One cocked his head (or the top of him anyway, that kind of resembled a head). "Oh come, now, you mean you don't know?"

She shook her head violently.

"Your openness," said one of the Short Ones. "To ideas, possibilities, flights of heart and spirit."

"Your vision," said the other Short One. "For a world where humanity shall dwell in peace and none shall make him afraid."

"Your dreams," said the Tall One. "To be the mother of the Messiah."

She closed her eyes. Old Mrs. Martex loomed before her — sixth grade. Iron hair, steel eyes, red X's dripping as blood from her pen. "Judith, daydreaming again, eh? Always off on some other planet, aren't you." A sharp jab with the pointer, still chalky from the geography assignment on the blackboard. "Wouldn't you like to share your dream with the rest of us?" Hot cheeks, wet eyes, stammers, amid the giggles and titters of the others. "I was thinking about — I mean wishing for — " How to open the golden chest, locked in her heart, lined with velvet, limned with light, refuge and vision? To spill its secrets before the icy words and dark laughter of Mrs. Martex and the others? The golden fields through which her winged feet carried her to the glowing Baby, surrounded by angels and shepherds and Beings of Light, proclaiming, "behold our Lord," and whispering, pointing, "behold His mother."

"I saw — saw — "

No! Never to tell! She tore herself from the room. Down, down the hall, to the bathroom, the buzzing laughter pursuing her like an army of wasps. Flushing, flushing, till Janie Edwards — Teacher's Pet and Goody Two Shoes of the First Order — came to fetch her with her smirk and her swishing skirts.

"This is what you always wanted, isn't it?" the Tall One was saying.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She closed her eyes again.

Grandmother on the couch, the giant photo album spread across her lap like an ancient shawl, the numbers glowing darkly on her wrinkled white arm. "See? That young girl?" A smiling face, little crinkles of merriment around the eyes, arm lifted in greeting to a joyous future. "That was me, *before.*" And the tears, watering the picture, blurring and obliterating the face of hope and promise that was soon to be scarred by coals and ashes, the arm uplifted, soon to be stamped, branded with the eternal pain. "I held on because someday, there would be you — Judith. The Future."

And what was the Future? If the past ended in the charring heat of the oven, the future must begin in the warmth of the womb. Her womb.

And so the dream. Of conception, birth, growth — a passage of everlasting safety: Redemption.

A vision locked away, still. Locked through girlhood, through the little games and prattles of the others in the playground; through budding womanhood, the mysterious and wondrous preparations her body was making for inviting and welcoming that Ultimate Child into the world; through courtship with Al. Dear Al. Nice enough, to be sure. He stopped the car to take a hurt puppy to the animal hospital; he diligently wrote checks to the American Cancer Society and to the U.J.A. He climbed on top of her twice a week, whispering kind words in her ear. But once — only once — did she dare, timidly, with trepidation and prayer, to ask — Is this enough? Isn't there more, a Final and Ultimate purpose? And Al's blankness. "We're here. Isn't that enough?"

Only once, that is, until the arrival of the Beings. "Don't you see them, Al?" she pleaded. "Three. There. Over there. The Tall One's in the middle, he's sort of flanked by two shorter ones." First blank-faced stares, a mild suggestion to get more sleep, maybe the pregnancy? — Then That Look. Gazing at the floor, shifting of feet, twitching of lips, eyes half-mast. Then recoil, horror. Then the trek, the endless trek to doctors, the mutterings and deliberations about medications and dosages, the inane questions ("When were you toilet trained?" "How did you relate to your peer group?"). The talk of shock treatment, how it would affect a growing fetus. The decision, finally, as she held firm to her Vision: maybe a few days here, safely locked away, would be enough to bring her to her senses.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

If not — then afterwards — well, the medicines, the shock, think of all the avenues available.

And now Al, walled behind breeziness and false cheer, stopping on his way from work, bringing her tidbits of office gossip and asking where he could find a pot to steam beans, and whether to wash underwear on hot or cold. Al, inhabiting another world, a world of ads and ad blanks, synagogue once a year and whisperings in the night twice a week.

A vision of Purpose — hers — which transcended anyone else's. To bring Him into the World. To be the Mother of the Messiah.

And now, here were these Beings — Angels? Aliens? — to bring it all to fruition. And she was thrashing about in her mind, resisting. Why?

"I — I don't want to lose my baby." Her voice was tiny, wavering. "Maybe, maybe just let the Earth go its own way. Die. Whatever. But don't take my child away from me."

A tsk-tsk from the trio. "Sacrifice all to save one?" A shake of the headlike parts. "Is this the Judith whose life dreams have been devoted to saving the world?"

She sighed and sank back, her face seeking refuge in her cupped hands. Then a thought, a tiny splash of harmony amid the dissonance. "Why can't I come too?"

"We don't have accommodations for two. Just one."

"So build more!"

The three surrounded her, engulfing in their dripping kindness. "We have so many planets — so many universes — so many galaxies. All in serious trouble. We can only save one from each, or we'd be overrun, you see, and then we couldn't help anyone. Could we?"

A prison. A prison of words, arguments, logic. A prison of her own dreams, the milk of childhood fantasies soured by this trio of warmth which was to bring it to fruition. To voluntarily turn the tiny particle of her which was growing and kicking inside her over to Others to raise —

Then her eyes widened, her heartbeat quickened, hands, icily moist, clutched her belly. The baby would be taken from her anyway. These people — Al, the doctors — who wouldn't believe her, who thought the Beings were simply shadowy actors on some demented mental stage — they would start pouring their poisons into her body as soon as Baby would be born, would deem her an unfit mother and wrench Baby from her anyway.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She looked up. The Tall One was looming over her.

"Yes!" It came out in a rush, a burst of sorrow, joy and relief. "Yes. Yes. You'll take the Baby when it's born."

She was suffused by Light as the Trio surrounded and submerged her, transmutative, embracing, complete. "We will come back then," the Tall One proclaimed. They filed out in a solemn procession of dwindling light trickling behind them as tears.

Beings gone.

Home again. Al rushing about. "Can I get you some water? A sweater? Would you like to go out to dinner?" Al, brimful of flowers and solicitude.

"Are you sure you should go out? I can also do the shopping, you know."

Al, like a puppy sniffing a forbidden room. "Do you still — you know — are those Things still — do you still think those Things you saw are real?"

"They've gone now," she said flatly. And hid her face from Al's capers of delight.

LABOR.

A midnight ride through star-studded silence, ripped openly by the jagged shards of pain-streaked screams. Heaving, contracting, hurting, heaving, pushing — Al's voice reaching across the red chasm. "A boy!"

A boy. "For I know that my Redeemer liveth, and in my flesh shall I see God."

She clutched the baby to her chest, its matted wisps of hair washed by her tears.

"You want to name him *what*?"

Weak, willow-kneed, she struggled to sit.

"That's not a Jewish name. You can't get more Christian than that!"

"Okay." Weakly she turned to face the wall. "Okay, then. Samuel."

"At least that's Jewish." A pause, then Al timidly touched her arm. "Why Samuel?"

"Read the Bible," she said and she slept.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

* * *

Home again.

They would come to claim him soon, she knew. Reverently she bathed his soft little body, reveling in its magic pudginess. Greedily she nibbled his padded toes. She closed her eyes as he suckled, immersing herself in the ocean of his gurgles.

They came when he was eight days old. She was changing his diaper, the cloth traveling expertly through the hills and valleys of infant terrain.

"No!" She clutched him and started to cry.

"You promised." The Tall One stepped forward.

"And isn't this what you've always wanted? Dreamed about?" one of the others put in.

"Yes, but — "

But — but to sacrifice her son to save humanity? To forestall and prevent a repetition of lines of other children, skeletal children, hollow-eyed and bloat-bellied, marching to a gas chamber? To wrench the Baby Messiah from his mother to prevent other children from being wrenched away from theirs?

"What about his circumcision?" she asked suddenly. "It's scheduled for today, and the whole famiily is supposed to come."

"He is circumcised of heart," the Tall One said, "And needs no ritual to prove it."

"Can't I have some more time with him?" she pleaded. "Please?"

The three huddled, a massive conclave of moving light. "Three days," the Tall One said finally. "At midnight of the third night, we will meet you in the garden, and you will give him to us."

Three days. Seventy-two hours. Four thousand, three hundred and twenty-two minutes. Two hundred fifty-nine thousand, two hundred seconds. To savor the baby skin and baby sounds, to love and laugh and pray and cry. To greet family (all carefully polite, studiedly casual, prepped to show that Judith was As Normal As Anyone Else although she'd done time in — oh God — a mental institution) with plastic smiles and rote inquiries concerning health, job, children, new homes; to graciously accept baby gifts, generating artificial excitement over stretch suits and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

teddy bears. To watch her son's grimace, hear his shriek as the knife deftly did its work, and know it wasn't necessary to pain him, but that she was helpless to prevent it, and to hear the lusty shouts of joy as the blood was drawn, the ritual complete. To hold him and hold him and hold him, and not let go. To tuck him next to her in bed, rest his downy head on her chest, as the minutes and seconds ticked by.

Midnight of the third day.

Al, snoring beside her in blissful ignorance, the oblivion of sleep blanketing his soul. Al, muttering and grumbling, opening his eyes as he heard the bedroom door open, with Judith's murmured soothings, reassuring him back to sleep.

Nighttime silence punctured by the occasional chir of a cricket, or hoot of an owl on a lonely forage for tiny, furred sustenance.

Judith crept down, Baby Samuel swaddled in her arms, a bag slung across her shoulder, filled with bottles, formula, diapers, stretch suits. The scraping of a key in the door. Tiptoeing across the garden, the light lush, then fading, little strobes of light wickering as she carried Samuel through the tangles of foliage, that small and improvident desert in the back and toward that place of sudden and cascading light where they were to stand and coming upon that place then, the riotous little cartoon ship lurking in the background and not the three but just the Tall One this time, the Tall One alone looking at her with considered gaze as she came toward him. Not so much judgmental this time she thought as inquiring, the gaze of the rabbis looking down upon the crowds in the cloister. The Tall One reached for Samuel. "You have come," he said, "and now the baby."

Samuel writhed against her, one small peep, then subsided in her grasp. "Wait," she said, "one moment — "

"We are on time control," the Tall One said. "It is impossible to wait. All is arranged. Please pass the baby."

"You are alone," Judith said, "Where are the others?"

"They are not with me. They are waiting in orbit beyond. I have come alone." The Tall One leaned toward her, extended his arms. "I cannot wait any longer," he said, "We have arranged this within a very fragile loop, if we lose this — "

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I don't know," she said, "Something is wrong. Where are the others? This doesn't feel right? Perhaps I should — "

"No time," the Tall One said, "there is no time for this," and reached for Samuel, his grasp suddenly urgent and demanding, tremendous in the clenching light and Judith felt the shuddering from deep within her, the stabs of revulsion which she had felt so long ago whenever she had thought of it. Oh, that act of actually yielding, the shocking, gratuitous encounter with the Messiah which somehow she had never been able to properly frame.

And oh, oh Lord: it was not so much a shuddering but a kind of denial so deep within that she reeled in its grasp, hurtled back a step, then another step, Samuel convulsing in her arms and then crying. A priestly bellow here and the Tall One muttered something which she could not hear, could not quite assess and came toward her in a pose of perfect urgency, absolute necessity and laid a hand — a talon — upon the baby and "No!" Judith said, and "No!" again more loudly, urgently, the tug of the Tall One at the infant enormous, her own desperate squeal and trying to hold onto the infant and behind her, somewhere within the house Al's voice: "Judith? Where are you? What is going on? Where have you gone, Judith?" and the sound of windows smashing, doors abutting, deep and terrible struggle in the carved silence in the garden and it was at that moment, not one moment sooner, perhaps in fact a little later than that, that Judith grasped the nature of visitation early and late, judgment masked and unmasked. The enormity of that judgment. The bellowing and stampeding of the cattle in Job's enclosure as burning and burning His fire came to take them all. ☙

New York Erev Yom Kippur 5756

**FILLING IN THE GAPS — ANSWER**

This is what's hiding beneath the black bar on page 119.

SGI5NG5 EIGTIQN

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

*Sheila Finch's first lingster story, "Babel Interface," appeared in* Amazing Stories *some years back; her last one in these pages was the novella "Reading the Bones" in January. And now this popular series continues with a trip to the planet Ozal and an adventure we think you'll find to be quite startling.*

# The Naked Face of God

## By Sheila Finch

MERIK QINTANA VAULTED over the net, a long, two-handled bat in his hand. "My game, Excellent One."

Ozal's sun nestled low in rosy clouds on the horizon, and a flower-scented breeze touched the xenolinguist's damp brow. At his feet, a flock of tiny, rainbow-feathered *tilitili* birds fluttered up from the lawn surrounding the gaming court, only to be pulled back by silken cords around their legs.

"Terrans have too much magic for me." Jheru, Excellent One of Ozal, answered languidly, but the tall alien's narrow, golden eyes were mistrustful.

Assignment as lingster to Jheru's court didn't include deliberately losing games to him, in Merik's view. Ozal was a small planet, hardly important in the affairs of the Orion Arm, but since Jheru didn't know that, it wasn't wise to allow his dislike to show. He said lightly, "Luck, not magic, Excellency."

Jheru, nude and hairless, built like a child's stick-figure drawing with the unblinking gaze of a starved hawk, dropped his own bat carelessly on

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the ground and held out a hand. *Tilitilis* scattered anxiously out of the way. Merik wiped a sweaty palm on his hip, then touched the Excellent One's hand briefly with the tip of a finger as this world's courtesy dictated.

Jheru stared at something. Following the direction of the Excellent One's gaze, Merik saw a small male alien in coarse and shapeless clothing draw back into a thicket of scarlet shrubs that lined the perimeter of the garden. Even at a distance the physical differences between this male and the Excellent One were apparent. Jheru, like most of the inhabitants of Ozal, made six-foot Merik appear short; the lurker, who seemed to be from a race Merik had not seen before, appeared a little over five feet tall, thick-bodied with abundant head hair.

"Guard!" Jheru said.

Two bald Ozalians with emerald fringes across their naked shoulders to signify rank had been lounging watchfully nearby. They loped toward the bushes where the small male had been. Even after three years on Ozal, Merik still expected Ozalians to fall when they ran, pitching themselves precipitously forward on over-long, skinny legs, but somehow, they always managed to avoid calamity. Jheru strode toward the palace. One of the guards immediately returned and followed him; the other had disappeared.

Merik grabbed his own thin tunic off a bench and pulled it on, still not comfortable with the Ozalian habit of nudity. He retrieved Jheru's bat and tucked it under his arm with his own, then sprinted after the Excellent One. Behind him he heard shouting, and he turned to watch a line of guards run past. Just as they reached the edge of the gaming court, an infant — probably one of the palace servants' offspring — ambled out of a flowerbed directly into their path. The guards didn't swerve.

The dust they'd kicked up settled slowly, and Merik stared at the fallen child, the flowers it had been picking scattered across the grass. The frightened *tilitilis* panicked and tangled their silk cords; bright feathers drifted down on the little body. Very few people's lives were worth worrying about in Jheru's beautiful city; Merik could be the one the guards trampled next time.

Lingsters were under Guild injunction not to become involved in a society's moral or ethical issues. He retrieved the posies and laid them

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

gently on the infant's thin chest as a female Ozalian came screeching down the path.

This was not what he'd imagined he'd be doing when he'd first apprenticed as a youth to the Guild of Xenolinguists. He'd idealized the lingster's role as sacred mediary between the varied races of the Arm, dedicating his life to the holiness of words wherever they arose. "*First was the Word and I am its carrier,*" the Guild taught its apprentices. "*Through me flows the meaning of the universe.*" As a young man, he'd believed in the purity of the lingster's mission.

But the reality he found once he left the Mother House was grittier. A lingster's work was often dangerous, frequently undervalued by those who benefited from it most, and if there was any meaning in the universe, Merik had yet to find it.

A flight of milk-white stone steps, delicate as the legs of the Ozalians who mounted it, soared gracefully up from the gaming courts to the palace. Everything the Ozalians built had this same ethereal beauty, fragile-seeming as crystal. And just as transparent, he thought; he found no heart in anything.

Two more weeks, and a Terran ship that called on Ozal once in three years would return and take him away to another assignment that would in turn be little better than this one. One day soon he'd leave the Guild. Right now, he'd be grateful just to leave Jheru.

The Excellent One had already vanished up the steps. Merik hesitated. Twilight settled over the lush gardens; he could hear the drowsy murmur of the tethered birds on the lawn. Soon, the palace cooks would serve the third of four feasts each day that Ozalians with their faster metabolism required. He decided to wait until the last meal and turned away from the steps.

Immediately, the world went dark around him. Something thick and foul-smelling dropped over his head and shoulders, tightening against him as his arms were bound to his sides. The bats slid uselessly out of his fingers. Under the sack it was totally dark. He felt himself yanked off his feet and carried bent at the waist over a shoulder. He kicked hard and was rewarded for his trouble by a sharp slash on his bare calves.

"*Insha dya,*" a gruff voice said.

"*Ny'e' dya, tol!*" another replied.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I demand to be released!"

Not recognizing the language of his kidnappers, he used the High Tongue of Jheru's people. Most races on Ozal spoke it as a second language if not a first. There was no reaction from whoever carried him so urgently away. They were moving fast now; he was aware of the swift passage of cool air over his legs.

"*Dya, dya, n'tik!*" the gruff voice said.

"If you'd wanted a lingster, you could've tried asking!"

He choked as his mouth filled with stinking fibers from the sack over his head. He kicked angrily against his kidnapper again. For the second time the stick slashed painfully across his calves. He didn't try it again.

Pain engulfed him. His legs were numb, his arms burned, his head ached from the bouncing it endured in this upside down position. They seemed to be moving uphill over rough terrain; he felt the sting of wiry branches against his legs, the scrape of rock. It got rapidly colder. Several times he was aware of being handed off from one kidnapper to another, traded like a sack of potatoes, but his abductors' pace hardly slackened, and he couldn't tell how many of them there were.

Then his captors halted abruptly, allowing him to slide to the ground. Muscles cramped and fire raged through his veins. His mind raced. There was no motive that he could see for anyone to kidnap a lingster whose services could be easily engaged. He had no wealth, Jheru certainly wouldn't ransom him, and the Guild never responded to the demands of terrorists or blackmailers.

Hands fumbled with his bonds, and suddenly his arms were free. Blood rushed back in a stinging tide. The sack was removed and he could see that he'd been brought to a place of great boulders. The night air was very cold at this altitude, and he shivered in his thin tunic.

Three short, stocky males bent over him, their faces shiny with sweat in the moonlight. They were breathing hard, but otherwise showed little sign of strain.

"I — not — harm." The speaker used Ozal's High Tongue, haltingly.

Merik blinked up at the small alien he'd seen by the gaming court, middle-aged, with a wide, flat-nosed face covered in pale, downy hair, and narrow, slanting eyes.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

*"B'ni gev cha, tol?"* a second male said.

The first alien murmured a reply and the other went away. "I not harm," he said again.

"Like hell!" Merik said, sitting up. "You — "

The small male held up his hand, silencing him. "Not harm!"

"You've got the wrong man, you understand? Wrong man!"

The alien frowned in confusion. "I — want — You work."

"Damn you! Go through regular channels like everybody else."

The alien's grasp of the High Tongue appeared sketchy. Then he grinned, revealing chipped and stained teeth. He tapped his chest. "Zov." He squinted at Merik to see if he understood. "Name. Zov." He pointed at the lingster and tilted his head, waiting for an answer.

Merik sighed, then stood up and touched his own chest in the widely recognized gesture of naming. "My name is Merik Qintana."

The alien touched his brow in salute.

Merik copied the gesture. "What do you need a lingster for?" When the small male frowned, he tapped his chest again. "Me. Lingster."

"Ah. Lingster. You help."

The third alien spoke. *"Py'ani, tol. Py'ani na!"*

"Come." Zov touched Merik's arm.

*Tol,* an honorific, he thought. In spite of his seething anger, he had already begun cataloging variations of tone and pitch in the alien's speech, isolating phonemes and marking the frequency of their repetition. He allowed them to lead him into the mouth of a cave.

Zov strode ahead of him down a dark passageway. Merik followed more cautiously. They stopped at a place where the walls opened abruptly into a good-sized cave. Welcome warmth met him from a fire burning in a stone-ringed hearth, its flickering light striking sparks from exposed veins of metal in the rock overhead. Over the flames, meat hung from a spit which a near-naked child turned slowly. The aroma of roasting flesh reminded him he'd skipped a meal.

A circle of about forty figures in furs and rough woven cloth squatted around the fire, their shadows leaping on the cave walls. They spoke together in the same guttural, staccato language Zov had used, but conversation stopped when the speakers saw the human.

*"Ty'a'cha."* Zov indicated the tribe around the fire. The alien shrugged

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

off a heavy fur outer garment he'd been wearing; under it, a thick metallic collar gleamed in the firelight. "First, eat!"

The tribe shuffled around, making space for Merik, who sat cross-legged on the stone floor beside them in a wave of sour sweat, animal skin, rancid fat and rotting teeth; he kept his breathing shallow. Nobody spoke, but he caught their openly curious glances.

A young female cut meat from the turning carcass and held it out on the point of a knife to Zov. Then she carved a second chunk and offered it shyly to Merik, thin bracelets clinking on her wrist. His gaze moved from the female's ornaments to Zov's collar piece to the gleaming veins in the cave roof. The tribe wasn't so primitive that its members didn't know how to work silver when they found it.

Now a young male moved the spit out of the flame, and an old female pulled the juvenile onto her lap and fed him morsels of meat. The young female squatted at Merik's feet, and he glanced down at her. She was small and plump, with a round face, silky as a ripe peach, and slanted eyes that were all black pupil, a vivid contrast to the bald, spindly females of Jheru's race. But she paid for this comeliness, he noticed, by an increased susceptibility to parasites. As he watched, small red-shelled bug-like creatures crawled along the part in her hair.

The tribe picked up the conversation. Merik listened, automatically scanning this new language for the particular patterns of deep structures created by its biogrammar.

"You," Zov said, his mouth full of meat. "Help. You help. Yes?"

He wasn't ready to forgive his treatment yet. "Maybe. Depends what you want me to do, *tol*."

There was an intake of breath from the circle, and for a moment Merik thought he'd misread the word's meaning. Then in the silence that followed, he became aware of newcomers at the back of the circle. Two burly males in greasy furs set down a wrinkled old male they'd been carrying. The old one wore what appeared to be scraps and tatters from more than one animal's pelt; stringy gray hair fell forward over his face, and his sunken eyes blazed with such ferocity Merik's first thought was the old alien was insane.

One of the females shuffled aside to make room, but the old alien remained standing, leaning shakily on a staff, staring at Merik. The young

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

female got up hastily and fetched a slab of meat for the newcomer. The old male grabbed at her arm, and she settled docilely at his feet. No one spoke.

Shaman, Merit guessed; the tribe's magician. Every aboriginal tribe he'd ever encountered in the Arm seemed to have one. Sometimes more than one. Loony old men or women who thought they had access to the wisdom of the universe. They could be dangerous, and they usually resented lingsters.

Zov waved an arm at the silent group who hurriedly scrambled up from the stone floor and disappeared in the shadows at the back of the cave. The shaman whacked at the young female with his staff, urging her after the others; she skipped out of his reach, bracelets tinkling. As his arm moved, the shaman's tattered sleeve fell back, and Merik saw the track of long scars in the lightly furred skin below his elbow.

Zov peered at the lingster through the fire's glow as if he were lip reading. "You talk with other. Not *Ty'a'cha.* You talk for?"

"Talk for," Merik repeated. Might as well indulge them, keep them friendly. "That's what lingsters do, *tol.*" The outline of the problem began to reveal itself. Zov might be a primitive, but he obviously understood that lingsters translated things. "The *Ty'a'cha* want to make peace with an enemy?"

Zov frowned intently, catching up. "Very bad enemy!" he observed.

On a planet like this there might be hundreds of tongues, each used by a tiny handful of speakers. He hadn't realized Zov's language existed before today, and the language spoken by Zov's enemy was probably equally unknown. Achieving an interface between two languages neither of which the lingster knew in advance took time. And interface required the use of the specific drugs in a lingster's fieldpack — which he hadn't had with him when he'd been abducted. But he knew the world's other cultures, the linguistic families. He could handle it.

"Enemy kill *Ty'a'cha.* Many, many! Females. Babies — " Zov broke off, obviously overcome with the enormity of this enemy's evil. "You — " He pointed to his right ear. "You?"

The old male with the scarred arms spat deliberately into the fire, his mad eyes never leaving Merik's face.

"I hear," Merik said. "I understand."

Ozal was a bloody world, he thought, the memory of the trampled

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

child rising in his mind. He was sick of it. There was no reason to hope these people were any less barbaric in their customs than the Excellent One. The sparkle of silver in the cave's roof drew his eyes again. Technically, he was under contract to Jheru at the moment, but he might be persuaded to work a little on the side — if the *Ty'a'cha* were prepared to reward him sufficiently for taking the risk.

His conscience pricked. Long ago, he wouldn't have thought that way, when he'd been young and the profession had been all of his philosophy and his religion. Now he knew better. Lingstering was just a skill, an art of talking which he was good at. And why not get paid well for it?

"Come!" Zov rose up from the floor.

Instantly, the two burly males reappeared from the shadows and lifted the old shaman as if he were unable to walk by himself. Merik followed Zov and the others down a passage that became increasingly narrow. Nobody seemed to have thought there was a need for a torch. Ahead of him, Zov's footsteps echoed confidently on the stone. Merik moved cautiously, feeling his way. Then Zov halted abruptly and Merik — working from the cessation of sound rather than being able to see — caught himself just in time to avoid stepping on Zov's heels. It was colder here, almost freezing.

"See!" Zov commanded.

And oddly enough, after a few seconds Merik did. There was a diffuse light in the cave they'd come to; he glanced at the high ceiling, trying to find its source. There was a peculiar smell in here too, iron and something earthily pungent he couldn't identify but felt he ought to. Then he recognized the glow of bioluminescence coming from the walls which appeared to be marked in patterns.

Not patterns. He stepped closer, and his breath caught. The rock walls were covered with outline drawings of Ozalian animals. He saw long-necked *garii* running at full tilt across an imaginary veldt, *tomti* rearing to strike, their tails lashing in fury, huge *meklemek* beasts stepping ponderously in line like an advancing wave of marauders. There were birds in flight, game animals fleeing the advance of unseen hunters, and fantastic creatures that never existed on this or any other planet Merik had ever seen. The drawings covered almost every surface, the artists making use of the natural bosses and concavities that occurred in the rock walls.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The colors ranged from bright red through coppery brown to charcoal black, and each line glowed in the dark cave.

He became aware he was holding his breath and let it come whistling out. Whoever the artists were who'd drawn these creatures, they were hardly primitives.

"Good talk," Zov said. "Fathers. Enemies."

Talk had been a noun that time, not a verb. Merik turned to the *Ty'a'cha* headman. "They're marvelous," he said.

Zov shook a finger at Merik. "Not more. You talk!"

The shaman said something then in a high-pitched, rapid voice and Zov reacted angrily. Leaning on his staff, the old male raised an arm, his shredded furs swaying. He pointed at the walls, then at Zov, then turned to glare at Merik. There was something proprietary in the shaman's gesturing, as if the wall art were his and he resented the lingster seeing it.

Merik looked at the walls again. The drawings were some kind of magical conversation, apparently. But about what? If they followed a pattern found elsewhere in the Arm — even on prehistoric Earth itself — they were invocations to food animals to surrender to the hunt, or else they were charms to keep the pictured predators away. Yet Zov had displayed them in the context of talking to enemies.

Something glittered — a small spark Merik caught out of the corner of his eye — and suddenly apprehensive, he turned toward the shaman in time to catch him fumbling a blade into the sleeve of his robe. Then the shaman sank cross-legged to the ground in the dim glow of the fantastic drawings.

Zov left the cavern. The two males who'd carried the old man shoved Merik, urging him to follow.

Back in the first cave, one of them tended to the fire that had burned low in their absence; then they both withdrew. Merik sat hugging his knees next to Zov who squatted on his haunches, silver collar glittering. Above him, the firelight struck answering sparks from the ore striping the cave's roof.

"Gurja not want — not give — power," Zov observed. "Gurja not trust. I trust."

Merik needed time to gather samples of the *Ty'a'cha* language; the microchip every lingster carried in his brain was mostly useless without

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a computer to link with. For now they'd have to make do with Zov's halting knowledge of the High Tongue.

Zov spoke again. "Old talk — fathers. Not like now. Big enemy now. Gurja not know. I know!"

Gurja must be the disapproving shaman, Merik guessed.

"You talk. Then — all good."

"No, *tol*, that's not how it works."

But Zov waved the objection away and plunged on through the thickets of the High Tongue. Merik listened in silence, his imagination filling in what the headman didn't have words to express, piecing meanings together with snippets of history and gossip he'd overheard in Jheru's city. There was a new enemy who threatened the *Ty'a'cha;* this enemy didn't want the tribe's game, or its females, he wanted its subservience or its complete destruction, and the tribe was losing the battle.

"Jheru," Merik said as Zov paused.

Zov grunted. "Very bad enemy."

"The worst." No way Zov's tiny tribe could resist Jheru's might for long, with or without a lingster. They might be cunning and physically strong, but Jheru had technology.

"Gurja old. No power left."

A dozen Gurjas wouldn't make much progress with Jheru, Merik thought.

"You talk," Zov insisted again.

"You pay?" Merik could be equally insistent.

Zov glared at him. "*Ty'a'cha* pay!"

"How did you know I was a lingster?"

Zov explained haltingly how he'd lurked in the city, picking up words and phrases. He'd seen the coming and going of transport ships from space, and seemed to understand what they were. The leader of this tribe, Merik realized, saw the advantage of learning modern ways.

"And your shaman — Gurja — didn't agree?"

"Holy One not go. Stay with *Ty'a'cha*. Law of *Ty'a'cha*."

"If Jheru is willing to talk to you, *tol*, then you'll have to go back to the city."

"No! You talk."

A lingster was a conduit, a channel, nothing more. He had no power

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to make binding treaties. Even if he were rash enough to try interceding for the *Ty'a'cha* with Jheru, the Excellent One would never agree to the tribe escaping his rule. The sparkle of silver above his head told Merik that; if Jheru didn't suspect its presence already, he soon would.

Zov indicated Merik should roll himself up in a grubby pelt lying nearby and sleep, then set the example and was soon snoring beside the fire. The fur held a faint musky smell.

Merik lay awake thinking it over. At the edge of the firelight, one of Zov's warriors stood guard, a long blade slung over his back. He needed to stay alert here. There was no guessing what the tribe might do, but it would be nothing in comparison to what Jheru was capable of if he thought his lingster had betrayed him. He couldn't fault Zov's desire to move forward out of ignorance into the modern world, yet he suspected there was a lot here he didn't understand. He knew he couldn't achieve everything Zov wanted — that was impossible — but he wouldn't betray the *Ty'a'cha* to Jheru, either. Perhaps he could make inevitable progress a little easier for the tribe.

And if a little of their silver ended up in his pocket, that would only hasten the day when he could leave the Guild. There was really nothing to hold him any longer. Even what he'd once considered the sacrament of interface between alien language — the dangerous, addictive whirlpool that drew a lingster back again and again — had disappointed him, described, regulated, tamed by those who'd gone before.

IT WAS STILL night-dark in the cave when Merik awoke, though he guessed it must be dawn. The fire had burned low and the warrior who'd stood guard last night was shaking his shoulder. Merik sat up and discovered that the warm weight against his back was the young female who'd brought him meat from the spit. He was suddenly certain she'd been speaking to him, murmuring into his ear all through the night while he slept. He was sure of it, though he didn't remember a word she'd said; he wondered what it could mean. A parasite flickered like a tiny ruby at her hairline, then vanished; she woke and scratched the place absently, gazing up at him.

The sooner he got out of here the better. He got to his feet, thought

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

again, and reached down for the fur. It would be a long, cold walk back down the mountain.

But the warrior didn't lead him out to the open air. Merik recognized the narrow stone corridor they were following; it led to the cavern he'd been shown last night. For a second, his skin prickled and he felt a pulse leap in his throat.

Sensing his hesitation, the alien half-turned. "*Dya!*"

He really had no choice. He moved forward again, his eyes adjusting to the dim cave. He could see Zov and the humped figure of the shaman murmuring together. The atmosphere was pregnant with the sense of momentous things hovering. On the walls, the luminous paintings gleamed blood red with the eerie light of fungus.

Zov looked up. Gurja — as usual — scowled. Merik thought how feeble the shaman seemed today, barely alive.

"You talk now," Zov said. He seemed angry about something. "Gurja say."

Zov had called the rock paintings "talk," Merik remembered, speculating that the tribe used mutual art-making in a ritual to seal friendship among former enemies, a reconciliation of spirit and imagination that brought peace. It wouldn't be unusual. He'd witnessed similar rites elsewhere in the Arm, and on Earth, tribes had once celebrated truce with songs and dancing around the fire.

But no more, Zov had said, and he'd thought the old alien wanted to lead his tribe out of their Dark Age into the light of science. The lingster would replace the shaman as peacemaker. Yet now they apparently wanted him to paint pictures before he left. There were many things here he didn't understand.

"I don't know how, *tol*," he said mildly. "I'm not an artist."

"Gurja say!" Zov repeated.

An icy current of air from some unseen vent feathered across the back of Merik's neck and he shivered in spite of the fur around his shoulders. In the deep silence of the cave, he was aware of his heart beating, his breath sighing, the blood rushing through his veins.

Zov gestured impatiently with one hand, and Merik saw small mounds of dark pigment in bowl-shaped depressions on a rock ledge. He'd have to fake cooperation until he could get away. Luckily the *Ty'a'cha* weren't going to be sophisticated art critics.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Gurja half turned toward him, shuffling his feet by rocking his body rather than lifting them, and now he saw that the shaman was holding a knife. Gurja lifted the sleeve of his filthy robe, then drew the blade in a line through the hair on his forearm. Blood welled. The shaman watched impassively as it dripped into one of the stone bowls. After a moment he seized Merik's arm and — surprisingly strong for one who appeared so feeble — he'd opened a thin line across Merik's arm before the lingster could resist. Merik's blood dripped into a second bowl.

Stay calm, Merik thought. These were simple folk and they took this seriously; best not to anger them. He would endure it, then he'd get out of here, and before very long he'd be rid of this brutal world altogether. But watching his blood pool in the bowl made him light-headed.

Then the shaman mixed his own blood into the dry pigment with his fingers, and indicated that Merik should copy him. Silently, they both stirred the muddy paint that resulted while Zov watched, his attitude reverent.

The shaman raised his blood-smeared fingers and licked, his tongue flickering in and out like one of the *tomti* on the wall.

Zov nudged Merik to do the same.

He hesitated, then lifted his fingers reluctantly to brush his lips. The mixture tasted bitter, the iron of his own blood almost lost in something organic and pungent. He thought suddenly of toadstools, collected on Earth for a science class when he was a young student at the Guild's Mother House, the clammy feel of *Amanita muscaria's* fleshy gills, the instructor's warning of its toxicity. It had been part of a lesson making the students aware of the peril of mixing any other drugs, natural or manufactured, with the drugs they carried in their fieldpacks. It was dangerous for him to continue. He had no idea what the shaman's substance was or what its effects might be.

Zov nudged him in the ribs again, harder this time, and Merik identified the prick of a blade. The shaman shuffled slowly round to face a blank space on the rock where he began to trace a line.

Merik sighed, squinting in the dim light, hoping to find something easy to copy. Then, as he lifted his fingers to the wall in his turn, a wave of nausea shook him. His sight blurred and his head throbbed. The drawings of *garii* and *meklemek* seemed alive, moving across the stone.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Hallucinogens in the pigment. Like the contents of a lingster's fieldpack — but uncontrolled, unknown. His mind whirled. It felt like going into interface unprotected, the no man's land between languages, the roaring ground from which a tribe's history sprang. He had to get out while there was still time.

A harsh voice like a scream leapt over the darkness, incandescent and terrifying —

Merik's concentration shattered. Unprotected interface was dangerous, chaotic, like looking into the naked face of God. Shards of lessons the Guild taught rose in his mind, fragments of the emergency protocols designed to protect a lingster from being swept away.

*Step One. Let go of — Let go —*

He struggled, but he couldn't make himself recall the words that could save his life. The native drug was too powerful.

Zov touched his arm, urging him back to work. He stared at the alien, and for a moment his mind cleared.

*Step One. Let go of fear...*

Gurja was using his nails to work lines into the painted images. Merik could see the drawings becoming luminous under the shaman's fingers. He recognized a bird, a giant raptor stretching enormous wings. The shaman chanted in a high nasal whine, something rhythmic, repetitious; his face was skeletal in the eerie glow of the fungus. And Merik knew that the talking art Gurja practiced was not the art of reconciliation but the art of death to enemies.

A bright fog swallowed him then, making further thought difficult — a fog that now seemed stitched through with the unnerving, searing voice he'd heard before. There was a message here — an urgent knowledge he almost grasped, a presence —

Then flame seemed to arc across the chip, burning his brain dry of thought. Something raced through the interface, and he cowered before it like prey under the wings of a raptor. He felt the fabric of his being shredded in the turbulent darkness till he screamed in terror. Something opened its jaws to devour him.

He did the only thing possible for a lingster in jeopardy: he dove in deeper and surrendered to the fierce currents of language's birthing ground, risking all in an attempt to control from within.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The fog fell abruptly away.

A deserted hilltop. He stood on a narrow path.

Not deserted — *Something* was out there. Something primal, elemental, a power that howled in darkness. The One from whom all life, all language sprang.

*First was the Word —*

He would remember his training and not step out of the path of malevolence, much as he wanted to. *I am a conduit* — Something seized him — he was struggling — gasping — dying. He would not give way —

*Through* ME *flows the universe!*

The struggle stopped abruptly. He was back in the silent cave, the bowls were empty, and Gurja was making more cuts on their arms. Blood flowed again into dry pigment. Again they licked their fingers. His lips snagged on nails that were ripped and bleeding, yet he felt no pain.

The image of the raptor they were creating together was huge and menacing; it spread across the cave wall, glowing as the paint dried. He felt the power tugging his mind back to that reality behind the world. He lost sense of where his fingers ended and the image began as he drifted in the delirium of interface. The raptor's wings began to beat. Colors ran together and lines blurred till all that remained was a blood-splattered rainbow swirling in a drop of oil.

Then that too vanished and he was alone in chaos again, gazing into the unveiled face of God Itself.

"*Gol'zha'ti na!*" The shaman's voice echoed as from a great, stone distance.

Merik's bowels loosened as he collapsed.

WHEN HE REGAINED consciousness, he was lying on furs by the fire, with a splitting headache. His throat was raw, his lips stung, his tongue seemed swollen twice its normal size, and his fingers hurt as if they'd been thrust into the flames. Someone held a cup with brackish water to his lips. His stomach flared into agony as a drop trickled down and he doubled over, retching. He wiped his lips on the back of his hand and found it spotted with blood. Water splashed onto his arms; a hand touched his brow, soothing. He opened his eyes and saw the rosy young female.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She smiled and got up from her knees. Behind her he saw Zov standing at the edge of the firelight, his face solemn.

The cave was full of smoke that made him cough, but the fire in his stomach subsided. What was it he'd been dreaming? His memory was clouded. How long had he been asleep? Hours? Days? Dim images skittered through his mind — toadstools — a huge bird stretching its wings — Then nothing.

Zov stepped into the firelight's glow. "Not the enemy now," he commented.

"Not...enemy?" Merik frowned, trying to understand.

"Gurja gave his spirit to you. Tongue, too."

"Oh. Gurja." He tried to think about the words. There was something odd about them and he ought to recognize what it was. He nodded and his head throbbed again. "Gurja — "

"He's dead," Zov said, sounding satisfied. "His heart stopped."

Then it came to him. The alien wasn't using the High Tongue anymore. "*Ky'e'cha'ti,*" he'd said. Yet Merik had understood — not translated — the tribal language as if he'd been speaking it all his life. *Cha:* the folk. And *ti:* a diminutive, one of the folk, he. *Ky'e:* a state of non-living —

Then the Ty'a'cha language swallowed him and he couldn't hear it from the outside any more.

The young female came back with more water. He took the cup from her with unsteady hands and sipped. This time he managed to keep a little down though it scalded his stomach. As his arm came into view, he saw the long red wounds where Gurja's knife had slashed. They were already healing into scars.

Panic struck, cutting off his breath.

He needed time to think. He was alive, that was something. But he might have done irreparable damage by ingesting a wild hallucinogen, as powerful as anything the Guild used. Lingsters had to fear the unwanted, lingering effects of non-controlled drug use. What had he taken? He needed to know to gauge its effect.

His stomach knotted. How long had he been senseless? Long enough for cuts to heal, for the Ty'a'cha language to be whispered into his unconscious brain and stored by the chip. How much time left before the ship took off for Earth?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He struggled to sit up and found he was weaker than he'd realized; his legs were unresponsive to his brain's commands. He'd been careless, so sure of his superiority over these aborigines that he'd risked everything that mattered. His head pounded painfully with the stress.

Something else. He'd nearly lost control in interface. There'd been something in the chaos on the other side this time, an alien presence unlike anything he'd ever encountered; it had almost killed him. Whatever it was he'd wrestled, it was older than humanity or the Ty'a'cha. He'd met it on its own ground, but in doing so had he opened a chink to let it into this world? Or was he still delirious and thinking nonsense?

The female gently blotted sweat off his brow. In his exhaustion, he allowed her to lower him to the furs again. He dozed for a while.

Nightmare shapes skittered across the fragmented landscape of his sleep. A raptor moved across the dark void, rending it, bringing life into existence. A voice rumbled across space —

When he next awoke, Zov was squatting across the fire from him. The female lay curled beside him, awake.

"You're feeling better now," Zov said.

"No thanks to your medicine."

Zov threw back his head, laughing. "You're going to be as difficult to deal with as Gurja himself!"

The main thing was to get out of here as soon as possible. Merik peered through the flames at the tribe's leader. Forcing his tone to remain casual, not betray the rising anxiety he felt, he said, "You'll want me to speak to Jheru soon."

"Gurja said you didn't understand," Zov said jovially. "You have spoken already! The enemy will not live long now."

Take nothing for granted, the Guild taught. Make no assumptions. It was odd, thinking of the Guild in this language, as if it was beside the point.

The female stroked his arm.

Zov glanced at the female. "She belongs to you. The Chosen Folk pay their debts."

He moved his arm quickly away and was suddenly aware how badly he stank. He stared at the tribe's leader. "How long have I been here?"

Zov shrugged. "One revolution of the moon — maybe two."

Ozal's little moon raced around the planet in just under a Terran

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

week — He'd been here at least ten days. He tried desperately to stand, his fingers scrabbling for purchase on the rock floor, but his legs refused to move. The cave whirled around him and he was falling, falling down a dark tunnel back into primal void.

After a while, the cave stopped spinning and he saw Zov's face creased in a huge, benevolent smile.

"Gurja's magic was worn out," Zov said. "But you have new magic, from other worlds in the stars."

"I'm a lingster." He was panting now as if he'd been running. "Not a magician."

"You talk. That's what lingsters do. You talk and Jheru dies."

"I must go back — "

"The Holy One goes nowhere. I told you." Zov spread his arms wide as if he were apologizing. "It's our law."

The young female caressed his cheek with grubby fingers, then wrapped something around his shoulders. Looking down, he recognized Gurja's robe of tattered furs. The sour smell rose to his nostrils and he felt the answering madness rising into his throat. Terrified of what he might already have become, he made another attempt to get his legs to move.

Again, nothing happened.

He looked down at his useless legs and saw the new scars on the back of his knees where the tendons had been cut. His sight went black. He was the Holy One, and like Jheru's *tilitili* birds he wasn't going anywhere ever again.

"Merciful God!" he whispered.

"The gods are rarely merciful," Zov observed.

The female settled by his feet, her black eyes liquid. She stroked the scars on his arm with great tenderness.

He had to get down to the port and to the ship — He would crawl, pulling himself by his fingers — or the female would carry him, she was strong like her tribe —

He knew it was useless.

"You'll serve us well, Holy One," Zov said.

Take nothing for granted. There were possibilities everywhere if he could discover them. Even here. He breathed deeply, letting go of fear and despair —

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And he felt again the presence on the barren hilltop, heard the ancient voice that contained everything. "*Gol'zha'ti na,*" Gurja had said of him when he returned from that vision: "One with a shaman's power."

He remembered now the peculiar exultant tone the shaman had used. There'd been disagreement between the shaman and the chieftain; Zov had valued a science he didn't understand over the shaman's familiar magic, and that had angered Gurja. The old laws had been swept away by Zov's act of choosing a lingster as the next shaman. Gurja had lost, but the shaman had nevertheless been triumphant, for he'd understood that the power which seized Merik in interface was more terrifying than any science.

Merik closed his eyes and the numinous blood-red image of the giant raptor he'd created on the cave wall blazed against his inner sight. For a second more his thoughts fluttered like a flock of *tilitilis* — then doubt fell away.

When he was young, he'd thought of interface as a sacrament, something holy — not even guessing the truth. Did the Guild suspect? In its many secrets, was this one? He'd gone through the fire. He'd survived. But what was "he" now? Mad as old Gurja, perhaps. Or as infinite as the being he'd met on the mountaintop of his vision.

After a while, he opened his eyes and gazed steadily at Zov. A flicker of doubt ran across the alien's expression, and he took a step back.

Zov spoke hesitantly. "Perhaps — If the Holy One thinks? — A new way of doing things — Maybe we could allow the Holy One to go down the mountain — "

"There is no need anymore." He didn't recognize his own voice.

Zov shuddered, and the female covered her mouth with her hands. Merik's fingers played with her hair absently. A red parasite crawled across her skull and he touched it lightly with the tip of his finger. It shriveled to dust at the touch. He smiled; Jheru was as good as dead already, and he would kill Zov whenever it pleased him. The female he could tolerate for a while longer.

The gods were rarely merciful, except to one who wrestled them and survived.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

# SCIENCE

## PAT MURPHY & PAUL DOHERTY

## MESSING WITH YOUR MIND

ON THE TV screen, a psychic mutant covered with phlegm asks Arnold Schwarzenegger what he wants.

"The same as you," Arnold says. "To remember."

"But why?"

"To be myself again," Arnold responds.

The movie is *Total Recall*, an action/adventure flick based on the Philip K. Dick story "We Can Remember It For You Wholesale." Arnold plays an ordinary guy who is frustrated by dreams of Mars, where he has never been. So he goes to a memory shop to buy a false memory, the memory that he was a secret agent on Mars. While Arnold is unconscious, the folks at the shop discover that they can't implant the false memory because they find that Arnold really had been a secret agent on Mars! Then, of course, all Hell breaks loose and there's plenty of running and shooting and diving through windows and flames and explosions and all that other good stuff.

The interesting part (unless you really like explosions) is Arnold's continuing uncertainty: was his ordinary life false, a dream imposed on him when he stopped being a secret agent? Or is the current shoot-em-up situation all a dream? He can't trust his memories — and so he can't tell what is real and what is false.

You, of course, don't have any such difficulties. Your brain hasn't been tinkered with by secret agents or memory technicians. You can trust your memories — can't you?

Don't count on it. At the Exploratorium, we're working on an exhibition related to current research into memory and how it works. Some of the things we've learned are a little disturbing. So, in a spirit of generosity, we thought we'd share them with you.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

You have met the person who has been messing with your memories — and it's you.

## THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Before you read any farther, try the experiment on page 118. You can try it yourself by having someone read it to you — or try it out on a friend, by reading it to them. Do that, then come back and read the rest of this column.

No really — don't just keep reading. Try the experiment first. If you keep reading, we're going to spoil it so that you can't do the experiment.

Have you done it? Okay. (Yeah, we know that some of you haven't. Too bad. Your loss.) If you are like most people, these lists caused you to create a false memory — most people remember the word "sweet" as being on the first list and the word "angry" as being on the second list. Psychologists Henry L. Roediger and Kathleen McDermott, experimenting with people's responses to these lists, found that more than half of their experimental subjects remembered the word that wasn't there. Roediger and McDermott noted that people don't just believe that they heard the word; they remember it quite vividly. Memory researcher Daniel L. Schacter reports that he has tried this experiment in lectures with audiences of nearly a thousand people — and had 80 to 90 percent of his listeners remember the false word.

Remembering a word that wasn't there might make you begin to doubt the orderly workings of your own mind, but that's just the beginning.

## THE DEVIL IN THE DETAILS

Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist noted for his studies of childhood development, believed for many years that he remembered something that had happened when he was just two years old. He wrote, "I can still see, most clearly, the following scene, which I believed until I was about fifteen. I was sitting in my pram, which my nurse was pushing in the Champs Elysées, when a man tried to kidnap me. I was held in by the strap fastened around me while my nurse bravely tried to stand between me and the thief. She received various scratches, and I can still see vaguely those on her face. Then a crowd gathered, a policeman with a short

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cloak and a white baton came up, and the man took to his heels. I can still see the whole scene, and can even place it near the tube station."

A vivid memory of a traumatic event, right? Well, not exactly. Piaget goes on: "When I was about fifteen, my parents received a letter from my former nurse saying that she had been converted to the Salvation Army. She wanted to confess her past faults, and in particular to return the watch she had been given on this occasion. She had made up the whole story, faking the scratches. I, therefore, must have heard, as a child, the account of this story, which my parents believed, and projected it into my memory."

Piaget's memory is an anecdotal example of something that memory researcher Elizabeth Loftus has experimented with extensively in the laboratory. Your memories are vulnerable to what she calls "post-event information," facts, ideas, and suggestions that come along after the event has happened. You can, unknowingly, integrate this information into your memory, changing that memory, modifying what you believe you saw, you heard, you experienced. Over time, you can integrate post-event information with information you gathered at the time of the event in such a way that you can't tell what details came from where, combining all this into one, seamless memory.

The information that you integrate can come from something as subtle as a leading question. In laboratory situations, Loftus has documented such memory modifications. After showing a group of college students a film of an automobile accident, she asked a number of questions about the event. Among other questions, one group of students was asked "About how fast were the cars going when they hit each other?" Another group was asked "About how fast were the cars going when they smashed into each other?" A third group was not asked about the cars' speed.

The students who were asked about the cars' speed when they "hit" estimated speeds significantly lower than the students who were asked about the cars' speed when they "smashed into" each other. A week later, Loftus asked the students another series of questions about the accident, including "Did you see any broken glass?" The film had shown no broken glass, but the students who had been asked about the cars "smashing into" each other were much more likely to remember broken glass — which makes sense since an accident at a higher

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

speed is more likely to result in broken glass.

With the same sort of questioning, Loftus has led people to believe that they saw a yield sign where they saw a stop sign, to remember a clean-shaven man as having a mustache, to recall straight hair as curly.

## LOST IN A SHOPPING MALL

Maybe that doesn't seem like such a big deal to you. Sure, the details may be off, but the basic memory itself is still correct. It's not as though we've created a false memory — like being a secret agent on Mars, say, or having someone try to kidnap you from your pram.

But Loftus' research doesn't stop there. Working with her students, she has created whole memories, as detailed as Piaget's memory of the attempted kidnapping. The mother of eight-year-old Brittany, under the guise of telling an interesting bit of family folklore, suggested to Brittany that she had been lost in a condominium complex when she was five. According to Brittany's mother, Brittany had been found by a nice old lady who gave her a cookie.

Brittany accepted the story and ran with it. A couple of weeks later, interviewed by a friend of the family under a pretext, Brittany provided details about that imagined time that she was lost. She remembered that there were pumpkins around, and hay, that the old lady had made cookies; she remembered the exact words that her mother had said when she found them: "Thank goodness I found you, I was looking all over for you."

Another student of Loftus' provided Chris, his fourteen-year-old brother, with one-paragraph written descriptions of four childhood events, one of which was false. (The false event was that Chris had been lost in the shopping mall when he was five.) Over the next five days, Chris wrote about whatever details he could remember about all four events, adding details to his "memories."

A few weeks later, Chris was asked to describe each event and rate the clarity of each memory on a scale of 1 (not clear at all) to 11 (very, very clear). The shopping mall memory got his second-highest rating, number 8. He could describe being lost in detail.

Finally, Chris was told that one of his memories was false. When asked which one he thought it was, he chose one of the real memories.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When told that the shopping mall memory was fabricated, he had a hard time believing it.

Other researchers have produced similar results. Dr. Stephen Ceci and his colleagues asked preschool children about things that had happened to them and, in the same conversation, about something that had never happened: for instance, the time they got a finger caught in a mousetrap and had to go to the hospital to get the trap off. Once a week, for ten weeks, the children were asked to think hard about the events and try to imagine them. Finally, the children were asked about the imaginary events.

More than half the children remembered the made-up events, complete with details about how the mousetrap got on their finger and what had happened at the hospital.

## I NEVER FORGET A FACE

Okay, maybe that's not convincing. Kids tell stories to themselves; they get confused about the nature of reality. But you're an adult and (despite your taste in reading) you know the difference between fantasy and reality.

Well, adults get confused too.

Consider, for instance, the experience of memory researcher Donald Thomson. Sometime after appearing on a television show about the unreliability of eyewitness testimony, Thomson was picked up by the police and placed in a lineup. A distraught woman identified him as the rapist who had attacked her.

Thomson had an unshakable alibi — the rape had occurred when he was on TV, describing how people could improve their ability to remember faces. The victim had been watching Thomson on TV before the rape, and had confused her memory of Thomson with her memory of the rapist.

Memory researcher Daniel L. Schacter links this case with what he calls *source memory*, the ability to recall precisely when and where an event occurred. The rape victim remembered Thomson's face, but failed to remember where she had seen it.

## TELLING THE TRUTH

People tend to think of memory as being like a tape recorder or a camera, capturing what's out there. That doesn't match with the current thinking of most memory researchers. Their research and writings imply that your memory of an

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

event is really not something you capture. Instead, that memory is something you construct from bits and pieces: from what you saw and heard and experienced and felt at the time, from things people told you afterward, from suggestions and thoughts and implications, all filtered by your attitude, by who you are. Daniel Schacter writes that "memories for individual events resemble jigsaw puzzles that are assembled from many pieces" and suggests that all rememberers normally "knit together the relevant fragments and feelings into a coherent narrative or story."

Elizabeth Loftus discusses this in a way that is, for a fiction writer, extremely compelling. Loftus writes about "story-truth" and "happening-truth," terms she borrowed from Tim O'Brien's Vietnam novel, *The Things They Carried.* Happening-truth is the bare facts — what happened at such and such a time. Story-truth is the story you tell yourself about that truth, the details that you fill in, the technicolor version that helps you make sense of the world.

In story-truth, you are trying to make a pattern, to make sense of the world. To do that, you may unconsciously fill in a little bit here, adjust things a little bit there — in the same way that a fiction writer consciously edits and recasts a narrative. (If you doubt the very human tendency to fill in gaps to make sense of the world, try the experiment on page 119.)

Both the authors of this column keep journals — and both of us consult them, every now and then. Recently, the Exploratorium needed true stories of personal encounters with weather for a book. Paul dug out his journals to read his journal entry from the day one of the two ropes of rock climbers that he was leading up Mt. Hallett in Colorado had been hit by lightning.

Paul and his partner, Martin Meyer, had reached the summit and had descended to a lower, safer, position to wait out the afternoon thunderstorm. The second rope was still on the cliff when lightning struck the summit. Paul remembered being on the summit after the storm cleared and greeting the second rope of climbers as they arrived. He clearly remembered a smiling but shaken Mike Bolte climbing up the summit gully. Mike had been hit by some of the ground current from the lightning and had a burn mark on his hip to prove it.

When Paul went back to his journal, he was shocked to discover that the story he read in the journal

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

differed from his memory. According to the journal, Paul and Martin had alternated visits to the cold and windy summit to wait for the second team with periods of warming-up in a wind shelter. Martin, not Paul, had been at the summit when Mike arrived. Paul first saw Mike when he arrived at the wind shelter. According to the journal, Paul's memory of the event is false.

How could that have happened? Well, Paul is a good storyteller. And it makes a much better story to be at the summit greeting the climbers. The story-truth, the way that Paul wanted to remember the event, was stronger than the happening-truth, the bare and unsatisfying facts. But better story or not, Paul was disturbed to find out that his journal and his memory didn't match.

## WHO ARE YOU, ANYWAY?

Elizabeth Loftus writes about some of the reasons that people are disturbed by her research: "Human beings feel attached to their remembered past, for the people, places, and events that we enshrine in memory give structure and definition to the person we think of as our 'self.'" If we accept that memory spills over into dreams and imagination, then how do we know what's real? If we admit that what we remember is rarely the literal truth, then what can we trust?

When the psychic mutant asks Arnold Schwarzenegger why he wants to remember, Arnold answers, "To be myself again."

It is easy to think of yourself as the sum of your memories — the end product of all that you've ever experienced. But after doing research into memory, we find that it makes more sense to reverse that statement. Your memories are the end product of all you've ever thought and done, filtered through your perceptions and opinions. Your memories are shaped by who you are. *For references, visit Pat Murphy's web site at http://www.exo.net/jaxxx/* ☙

### THANKS FOR THE MEMORY

Have someone slowly read the list on the next page out loud. After they finish reading, you have three minutes to write down all the words you remember. If you don't have anyone handy to read the list to you, read it to yourself. Then close the magazine and take three minutes to write down all the words you remember.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| sour | nice | candy | honey |
| sugar | soda | bitter | chocolate |
| good | heart | taste | cake |
| tooth | tart | pie | |

Okay, now try the same thing again with this list.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| mad | wrath | fear | happy |
| hate | fight | rage | hatred |
| temper | mean | fury | calm |
| ire | emotion | enrage | |

Compare the words that you wrote down to the original lists. Most people falsely remember the word "sweet" as being on the first list and the word "angry" as being on the second list. The words aren't there, but they are strongly suggested by the words that are on the list. Memory is associative, and thinking about one thing can get you to thinking related thoughts. Remembering the words "candy" and "honey" and "sugar" and others that are associated with sweetness bring that word "sweet" to mind so strongly that it seems like part of the original list.

## FILLING IN THE GAPS

Take a look at these letters. Even though the bottom half of each letter is obscured, you can still read what the letters spell, right?

Well, actually, you can't. Take a look at page 92, and you'll find out that you really didn't have enough information to read the letters. Your brain tries to make sense of the world around you. Seeing shapes that could be the top half of letters spelling out a familiar phrase, your brain leaps to an incorrect conclusion.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

## IMPORTANT NOTICE TO SUBSCRIBERS ON THE MOVE

IF YOU ARE PLANNING A CHANGE OF ADDRESS PLEASE NOTIFY US AS FAR IN ADVANCE AS POSSIBLE, AND ALLOW SIX WEEKS FOR THE CHANGE TO BECOME EFFECTIVE.

BE SURE TO GIVE US BOTH YOUR OLD AND NEW ADDRESS, INCLUDING THE ZIP CODES. PRINT CLEARLY AND, IF POSSIBLE, ATTACH AN OLD MAILING LABEL.

**OLD ADDRESS**
(attach label here if available)

Name _____
Address _____
City _____
State _____ Zip _____

**NEW ADDRESS**

Name _____
Address _____
City _____
State _____ Zip _____

**SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE,**
**Mercury Press, 143 Cream Hill Rd, West Cornwall, CT 06796**

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

*Bill Eakin lives in Arkansas and teaches humanities and philosophy at the University of the Ozarks. His short stories have appeared in* Realms of Fantasy, Forbidden Lines, Space and Time, *and the anthology* Monsters from Memphis, *to name a few. He has also published a variety of articles and reviews in* Publications of the Arkansas Philological Association, *which is not something you hear every day. There's an old saying to the effect of "Bigamy is having one spouse too many. Monogamy is the same thing." This SF story takes a simple issue like that and shows how complicated it can be...*

# Monogamy

## By William R. Eakin

I WAITED FOR HER, TASTing her: almonds, a faint bitterness, coffee-tastes from the earlier morning, the biting peppermints of toothpaste. Finally she came into the room with the silver tray of espressos and cream, kissed me before she set it down with the gentle aloofness of our marriage, then served. There were clouds of coffee aromas in the room now: the mid-morning ritual had its own proper incense, strong like chocolate.

She said, "You've been distant again, these past several days." And instead of sitting down as she almost always did, she went to stand at the open window, pushing even further back the heavy, Tyrian purple curtains of my library. A thin light streamed down on her face from the east.

I didn't say anything. I knew if I responded, we would start into it. I didn't even want to like her anymore.

She said, "You've been seeing a lot more of the other women lately."

I fought against a squirm, watched her with the Stoic expression of a seasoned poker player, chose a spoon and stirred. I saw her in profile and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was amazed at how just ten years could age someone who had been so young. She looked a great deal like her father. It figured: the old man dominated our lives; our whole situation was his fault anyway, the fault of the wedding gifts: the property and money, the other gift. I never really even thought I would use it: I was enamored of the girl, wrapped up in the lace and flowers of the wedding and the honeymoon and seven truly good months.

And then, after months when I admittedly grew a little tired of it and her breath seemed stale and things settled into everyday weariness without the magic I married her for, I used his gift and started thinking of him as my best bet at salvation, the old bastard; we really did belong together to some fraternity that bound married man to married man. "I don't want to get into it tonight."

"You have been with them," she said gently, more to herself than to me.

I thought of them as other lives, lives not consecutive but simultaneous.

"You grow more and more distant and however many bright moments we've had together over these ten years, most of them are gray and dull, and it's because you've stopped having feeling for me."

It was true. I replied with banality: "But I do love you."

She shrugged. I knew she would. We'd had lots of conversations like this and frankly I didn't care anymore, and I didn't care if she cared. There were much better things to do, much more exciting people to be with, who didn't go stale, like bread left out in the air, in only seven months. There were people out there who were interesting for years and maybe forever; who met my needs. She walked to her chair and sat to drink coffee. We looked out across the dusky library through the window and watched the stillness of the birch grove.

A blue flash: the blue of sky, and of the ocean rushing by. The salt wind blasted over the windshield. I put on sunglasses and shifted gear. The Austin-Healey rumbled, then purred like a kitten into overdrive. It was winter in southern Florida, but the place knows no seasons. It was hot enough for muscle-shirts.

Now I saw oranges; I handed one to Madhur. She giggled; she always giggled, something I would never have expected from someone with a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wasted Ph.D. in physics or a penchant for knife fights. Oranges were all we could afford for lunch, with the Glenlivet scotch. I rammed the gas pedal and the bug-eyed Sprite danced through the traffic of Oceanside Drive. Some old woman honked and I refrained from flipping her the bird, but when she honked again, I fingered the double-barreled sawed-off at my feet, my head raging, until Madhur squeezed me right where I was most likely to respond, and my head cleared, and I made the car lurch forward and leave the woman, so close to her own road killing, far behind in the maze of traffic.

"You get wrangled up about everything, ole Jack. You need to learn to control it."

"To hell with it," I told her, and I took the bottle and fueled rage with burning water. I didn't look at her. The bruises I'd given her were almost gone, almost imperceptible against her dark skin; the worst were hidden under the shades anyway, but I could see them too well. No remorse, of course, but I could see them all the same.

She giggled and said, "All we need are the pigs to come down on us now with all that cash and paraphernalia and crap; ole Jack, if you get us knocked up just because you can't drive, then I'll slice your throat, okay? While you sleep." I sneered at her, knowing she was only half-serious, and rammed up the volume of the stereo. The techno-strains pumped into the roar of wind. We exited the freeway without changing speed, and hurtled through the mass of housing projects to the dilapidated, whore-infested pit of a neighborhood where people like us lived. The shiny, spoked wheels of the Austin-Healey screeched and we were in front of the white, two-room plank house on Elm Street.

Madhur giggled and looked at me and I knew excitement flashed through her brown eyes even though they were hidden behind dark plastic; I felt the adrenaline pulsing from her pores. I could smell it, simultaneously clean and dirty like the sweat she worked up when we ripped off a place, when we were criminals together, when we came home to sex and violence and a warped love on piles of green paper. That we'd done earlier. This time we were a little more cautious, until now, when there no longer seemed any sense in it.

"Okay, let's go see it," I said. She smiled like a girl. It had been only the second time in our two-year marriage we'd had real money, made a real

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

haul, and we'd kept each other from it for a day to let the steam dissipate. She pulled the keys from the ignition and was on her way up to the concrete front steps. I came after her, pulling my sawed off after me, and carrying it mechanically against my leg.

The piece felt warm to me, warm because it had rested on the warm floorboard. But the warmth was the same as when it was fired pointblank against the pulsating chest of the old security guard of the Branch Bank at 1st and Oceanside. And my fingers against the double triggers had the sensation of having just pulled and released. I tried not to think about it, tried to think about the money. But even before I reached the door I was feeling the sensation again, looking down and realizing I hadn't cleaned the old man's blood from the barrels.

She managed the working plantation and I taught part-time at a local college. In the quiet mornings together we drank espresso and sometimes did business. Now when she handed me the plantation's monthly financial report, her hand quivered. The quiver startled me. She never did that.

"Are you all right?" I asked her.

She looked at me stonily with her gray eyes.

"Things aren't all that bad, are they, Laura?"

She didn't respond.

"Is it money?" I looked down at the report and saw that things had never been better. It was us. "Do we have to? Do we have to fight? Can't we just — just once have a nice cup of coffee and relax and go over the business and — and not fight? Does everything between us have to be so damned dramatic?" I closed my eyes: I really meant so boring. And surely she felt that, too.

I opened my eyes and she said, "Did you do it just then? I mean just now?"

"No, I didn't do it, just now." I couldn't help sneering.

"You closed your eyes like — "

"I'm still here, right?" I found this kind of interrogation increasingly irritating.

"It's hard to tell, sometimes."

That was the beauty of the technology, of course. I smiled at her, almost involuntarily, with a taunt. Over the years, our very bodies had

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

learned to irk each other; little digs were so much a part of us that they were unconscious, second nature. Irritability, too much caffeine, too many years.

"You know we're skating our way to a divorce."

I looked at her and shrugged. "Things aren't that bad between us. Really. It's not like we have knock-down-drag-out fights, right? I mean, we're hospitable, right? Even if we bicker continuously. It's not me, you know, who's always so gray and — "

"Stop being so nervous and defensive."

"I'm not being defensive."

"Look at you — guilty, that's what it is."

"I'm not feeling guilty," I protested. I heard something in me say to get the hell out of the place.

"You are. It's written all over your face." I tried to make my face innocently smooth.

"I'm not. Really. Not a fuckin' guilty bone in my body."

She grasped my arm. "Don't do it. Stop doing it — so much."

"Doing what?"

"Damn it, Will, you've got to stop it."

"What, will I go blind or something? Have I ever neglected you? Ever not been attentive to your needs?"

"Damn it, you're married to four other women."

"Just fantasy — nothing wrong with fantasy."

"Four other women. It's not just fantasy."

Get the hell outta here. And I did.

GREEN: IT WAS A SUMMER night but green neon spilt onto wet pavement from the icon above the Green Garuda Lounge: a man holding a martini glass alternating with a bent pink bird that was supposed to look like an eagle, transforming from mortal into eagle, I supposed. An immigrant Kasmiri family owned the place; at least they could fix a good drink. I shook the water from my feet and passed underneath into the dark bar and sat at our booth; forest green naugahyde seats squeaked against my slacks, and I ordered a stiff Salty Dog. I waited, it seemed for hours, and finally she came, covered in a trench coat. I was on my third

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

then, and bought her one.

"So Lily, how was the show?" I asked. She did not remove the overcoat. Not enough underneath to do so.

"You need to drop the perturbation in your voice," she said. Hers was husky, deep for a woman's.

I looked at her and tried to see through the darkness into her eyes: hazel, sometimes green like the bar; I thought once we married, I'd be able to see directly into them, but I never could. I thought marrying her would be rescuing her, me with the shining armor. Another dead end. This was my place, this Green Garuda. I never went to hers: at least, I had not been there since we started dating, and finally married. I could not believe I allowed her to continue to dance. I hated her for it.

She sipped the Salty Dog.

"Why don't you skip the next show — " I started. I'd asked her this numerous times. I'd pleaded with her. I already knew the answer.

"What, and get booted out of the Kit-Club? Don, let's don't get into it. If you don't stop this heavy-handed stuff when we meet, I — "

I shrugged her comment away and she sat back against the overstuffed bench. "Look, honey, we used to have such a good time meeting like this — "

Now it was mechanical. Now it was pure form. I met her after work, between her shows, had a drink, went home alone, drank myself to sleep. Why had I come back to this lifetime? Why?

"I know you don't want me to work anymore, you know I'm going to work forever, and so there's no reason to talk about it, so why not just relax and have fun like we used to — "

"I thought once we married, eventually, it would change — " God, why had I come here? I had the choice of frequencies, why this one, today? Maybe — to call it quits.

"I'm an erotic dancer, Don. You married a friggin' erotic dancer. You didn't marry Annette Funi-Mickey-Mouse-cello, or Donna-Wax-the-floor-Reed. And I'm sure as hell not gonna ever be that, got it, Don? I'm my own person, and you can't strip my personhood away, got it? Maybe you could do that with all your other girlfriends or whoever the hell you were dating before we got hitched. But, damn, you married an erotic dancer, someone whose very existence is that, you see? It's my profession.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And I told you, I don't want to get into it tonight."

Something in her tone startled me. I tried to see into her eyes: I'd said the same thing, a few moments and a lifetime ago: I did not want to get into it. Was she smiling? Was she taunting me? I turned away from her and pulled the Salty Dog to my lips. I'd been attracted to her in this seedy part of town precisely because she was an "erotic dancer." Now I couldn't stand the idea. I couldn't stand it.

I shook my head finally and said, "I'm sorry Lily, I don't know what's going on with me. I don't even know why I'm here. Really." I was so damned wrapped up in her. That was the irony. I think I'd really fallen in love with her. But I couldn't say it: when I tried, I could only see visions of half-drunk lonely men gaping at her, watching her gentle breasts sway with a wild vulgarity that did not seem consonant with the nature she had when we were alone. I tried to tell her I loved her and could not say it.

"You should never have let me love you," I told her. I ached for her. I wanted her, I wanted her changed.

She read my thoughts: "You're doing it, blaming me. Your discontent is your own damned creation. And I'm not going to change to fit it."

She's pushed me to this! I told myself. Over the years, she made me love her, she lured me to it, to marriage, to totally enfolding myself in her, to dedicating everything I was to her, to finally being nothing except in relation to her — and then to be faced with this contradiction of who I had wanted and who I now wanted.

"You're an ass, you know, not accepting me as I am, as you loved me. You're not ever going to do it, are you?" She was mad now. She slugged down her drink. She left. Something was critical in the air of the bar, as if the universe itself could snap in two. Why had I come back to this lifetime? I wanted out. I wanted to end it. To shut off the frequency, close down the world, end it. At our apartment with Jack Daniels at my elbow and my face hovering in the mirror of the medicine cabinet, I did precisely that.

She slapped me across the cheek and I was startled back into consciousness. "Now." She said sternly. "Now is the critical time. Be with me."

"What?" I shook myself and realized I'd brought myself back to Laura. She was animated now, standing over me. She'd been pacing back and forth in front of me. I saw life in her face, even if it was angry life. It amused

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

me. I'd seen life in that same face at our wedding, when she lifted that veil, and I kissed those lips — even then, she tasted of almonds, but then it was a sweetness. We'd gone too far together to be happy.

"Stop it," she said at me. "Be here, with me, now."

"I am here."

She took me by the shoulders, something she never did; she was rarely physical. She shook me. I was utterly amazed. She said, "Damn it. It's critical. Now. After all these years. Be here now!"

"I'm all yours — "

"Will, Dad gave me one of them, too."

"What?"

"Dad gave me — " She let go. "He gave me one, too."

All I could spout was: "You — you didn't use it, of course."

"I didn't use it until you started doing it so much. Until you started drifting so far from me — "

"But, he shouldn't have — "

"Certainly if the husband can, the wife can, too."

"But — "

I couldn't believe my ears. I closed my eyes. I saw the wedding reception. Sure, it had smelled like half-mummified flowers, but it had been beautiful, and she had been beautiful, and I cried to look into those loving, gentle eyes of hers, cried to sense everyone listening as I spoke vows I truly meant, sealing something deep in the heart of the universe. And when her father pulled me aside, I couldn't believe what he said about men and women, and I couldn't believe I would ever use his gift.

"A certificate — " he'd said. "Take it down for a simple implant. It'll work something like the old insulin pumps some diabetics used to wear. Of course, it'll be under the skin, no one will know you have it; the buttons are so tiny they feel like pimples — "

"I don't think I'll ever need — " I was young, awash with champagne, giddy in a cricket suit, stupid.

"Sisyphus condemned to roll a rock up a hill, perpetually: that's marriage."

"Not mine. I love your daughter — "

"So a man who's going to grow, who's going to become a whole man, or higher than a man, has to stuff as much experience as possible into each

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

moment looking at that boulder. And some men — well, we wish we could be married to a lot of other women, know what we're missing. Sometimes we wish it so much that we can't even be where we are."

"Really, I won't need that — " I protested. "Besides, I like to be fully conscious — "

"You don't lose consciousness; you just wake up after the shift, as if you've suddenly caught yourself drifting while reading a book. Your body, most of your mind, everything works on automatic: like driving a car on familiar streets. It's just that the little pinpoint part of your consciousness you call 'I' will be — on vacation."

"Honestly, I don't think that's appropriate for a marriage. It's cheating — I won't use — "

"You'll use it; someday, you'll need a getaway. Believe me, I know my daughter very well. Lived with her these twenty-odd years, you know."

The stalwart old gentleman had a presence that was hard to resist. He spoke softly, but firmly, as if he knew nothing else except to stand as an authority. It was the way of the world, he told me patiently. Men had found adventures outside their marriages for centuries. And with this little device, a moment's infusion of nanotech receptors, men could do so in the privacy of their own consciousness. Shift frequencies and a man was a user tuned into an entire world, a new location, a new time, a new person, meeting other users, interacting, having, as he called them, "adventures." It was like virtual reality only much more real, much more powerful. "These little receivers, each one for a separate frequency — your choice of worlds — see, will put your 'I' in another world. Do I need to say more?"

"I like marriage too much, marriage to your daughter too much, to think about it — Surely...surely it's too expensive a gift."

"I own stock in the company. Own outright the broadcast transmitters down in Omaha. Major investment in the comsats that make it possible worldwide. And I wrote the programs for two of our four alternate planes."

I had heard about him even before meeting Laura; some sort of technowizard with old money and esoteric roots in a merely rumored mythic Illuminati tradition. I didn't trust him. I started to ask him about

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

himself when he pressed the certificate into my palm, nodded wisely at me, and was lost in the crowded reception.

And now I looked into my young bride's eyes, older, but still her eyes. Something cracked. I was too overwhelmed and confused to speak, and could only retreat.

HER DRESS WAS YELLOW and she looked at me with admiration, and, of course, I did not look at her but gazed out the window of my library at the dripping leaves of the magnolias that lined the road to the Big House. Horses ran on the track beyond — my horses.

She was obviously, painfully Southern — charming, graceful in the slow motions of an Old South etiquette that had not quite died even after two hundred years, appropriately modest and always naive. Naive. And that was what I wanted in her, the naiveté and the inability to do anything, anything except adore me. Talk about fantasy. Grace Prud'Homme: she was pale against the yellow dress, which was simply a pull-over and not the formal gown of a debutante — but it seemed that way. I had always thought this world too painfully close to Laura's, but this girl was nothing like her at least. This world was mine. So what if I'd projected into a plantation environment?

"I'm goin' to be workin' on some sewin' projects," she was telling me. "Most of the day."

I sipped tea. I smiled. To hell with anything else. Who needed a business woman for a damned wife. Someone who could cook, sew, massage the tired back of the patriarch: that was life. On Tuesday nights she went with me to the vestry meetings for the church. Of course, she was on the flower guild and would hover around in the sanctuary for a while, but then she came to the meetings to watch from the sidelines, to watch and obviously adore her man, who was really a man, and a fine upstanding model citizen, community leader, all that. Gag: Sometimes when I thought about myself, I gagged with the perfection of it all. But I loved it, ate it up; if these alternate worlds were fantasy, then let the fantasy run!

"Did you hear what I was saying, dear?" she asked. I looked into her eyes. Flat character. Oh well, whoever she was in some other dimension, in some other lifetime, here and now she served one function: to adore me.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The identity of the user, cloaked behind that shallow, witless character, did not matter. What mattered was that here, in this world, the admiration and servitude were real, as were the strength, the prowess, the authority I held here even if I could not in that other life, the one that didn't matter squat. The one with Laura — damn it; damn her.

The beauty of the alternate lives was that I could forget the one I'd come from, the dull one, the — the real one. But I was finding it difficult today. What had Laura meant, that this moment in our marriage was critical? I felt uneasy. I tried to wash her from my mind.

"What about supper?" I asked Grace.

"Oh, I'll be sure to wrangle up somethin' you like. I won't let the fun and games of the sewin' circle get in the way of takin' care of my baby." I felt a twinge.

"All right, honey," I told her. She stood. She was shapely, sexy, for me. She wiggled slightly in that yellow dress as she walked. For me. I closed my eyes as she left. What was she saying earlier? I had to think back; I'd blanked out on her, drifted off into another plane. I remembered with my body's memory, and could hear her speak.

"Darlin', are you awake?"

"Uh, yeah, yeah; just daydreaming." I'd been looking out the window.

"I was saying, the Circle girls will be here. We're doin' a charity quilt. I want you to get out, go riding, don't think about me for a while."

"Oh, I don't know — "

"Please, go. Enjoy it. I've already called down to have Agni saddled." Agni, my favorite Arabian. A beauty.

Remembering now that that was what I was to do, I nodded to myself, and strode like a horseman through the house, past the closed door of the massive chamber she called her "sewing room," and down into the gaping Great Room, where we'd married some seven years before. I could almost see all the guests, the room full of old widows and the rarer old men, the air full of the smell of lavender and potpourri and her dress smelling of cedar. She had wooed me; in this lifetime, I was an entirely self-made man, but she built me up. It was as if she expended all her time and all her energy — to be my wife. And, God, I loved getting married. To her, to the others, to — it was just damned Romantic. And it was too bad that the magic left,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

always left. Well, not here. The magic of her absolute adoration, however I had won it, was worth all the other lives put together.

I walked down to the stables to find Agni saddled and ready to go, but I wasn't in the mood. I sat on the horse, stroked her shining hide, breathed in the aroma of her pungent horseflesh, and could not get the now-seven pleasant years of marriage to Grace from my head. How unlike Laura she was! Thank God.

I tried to shake the comparison, and rode, but Grace's image, surrounded by the yellow flowers of our wedding bed, floated in front of me, and the more I thought of her, the more I thought of that damned Laura and that first real marriage, and I generated a desire for Grace to build up the contrast. I shook my head and spurred Agni into a gallop, the green fields like a carpet in every direction.

The thought of Grace back in that house called to me. I wanted her; I wanted her as I wanted no one else, no other wife, no other possible wife. Certainly not Laura.

I turned the horse's head unexpectedly and went back. The big house grew larger. I rode through the gate and down the narrow old carriage lane below the moist magnolias.

"Okay," I said to myself. "She is it. Not Laura, damn her, not anyone else. I'm gonna stay, close off the other frequencies, never leave again. This is home, her home and mine, because she lives for me."

I didn't bother to take the animal to the stable, but tied her to a post on the veranda. A car had already arrived while I'd been riding. Sewing circle — well, they could leave. I wanted to make love with Grace as I'd never made love to anyone. This moment and no other counted. This love. This life. I felt the hormones rushing in a cloud through my taut muscles; the cupid-like desire pulsing as lightning through me.

I leaped up the stairs to the door. I heard voices. A man's voice; it was ugly and coarse to my ears, because I had expected the voices of lavender-smelly grandmothers. It said, "You're beautiful. You — " And then there were noises, animal, wet, unbridled, grotesque. I pushed the door, found it locked, then kicked it open.

There she was, on the sewing table, on her back, her dress hiked up above her thighs, and some man with his face buried between them.

"What the hell!" I cried at them and the yellow statue I'd been broke.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Her head whipped around with an ugly, alien stare; and the man, sloppy with their sex, stood and pulled a gun.

I was unable to respond.

Then she said in a cavernous, distant, animal voice that "This wasn't the way we planned it, but it'll do."

I realized the "we" did not include me but him, the co-conspirator. Then they were on top of me, binding me, the Colt .45 — something from my own collection — squeezed into my temple. It didn't seem possible.

"What the hell — " I grunted. I was too stunned to move.

"It has to look like an accident," she sneered at me. Inhuman.

"How long have you been — " I groaned as he kicked me in the gut. It didn't matter how long she'd been conspiring against me: all the seven years or from the moment her name was on my will or just this last moment. A single flash of it was enough to bring me down.

They dragged me to the top of the stairs. I looked, I swooned, I felt deeply empty. And I pushed against them, but only half-heartedly, then fell into a wide expanse of blue.

I was looking at blue toilet paper. I was in the john at the house on Elm Street. I heard Madhur singing to herself in the next room. What the hell was she doing? Counting the money. She'd broken into the damned money.

I flushed the toilet. I couldn't believe she'd broken into the money without me. She knew better than that. She knew better than to cross me. She knew better, damn her.

The shotgun was at my feet. I jerked my underwear and my trousers up in a single motion and grabbed the gun, too. I'd hit her with it before, many times, and with many other things, too, mostly my fists, but obviously that was not enough. It hadn't taught her jack. It hadn't taught her obedience or to respect me or to love me. Never go to Vegas in a fast car with a lot of whiskey and a drug-wasted physics student. Turns a man into a damned criminal, with no respect. Okay, so it'd once been exciting. Bonnie and Clyde. Now she needed a real lesson. Damn her, she needed something she would never forget.

The pulse in my tracked-up arms raged against the skin. I shouldered the gun and burst in on her, and there she was surrounded with little slips of paper. "WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?" I leveled the barrels at

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

her chest, pushed them against her, pushed her with them across the room and up against the wall. My fingers throbbed with a heartbeat.

She said, "Go ahead. It's all fake anyway."

"What?" I sneered into her face, my eyes and teeth rushing like a bull toward hers.

"That old man," she said in a small, unemotional voice. "He gave us bags of monopoly money, ole Jack. He didn't even give us real money. You wasted him for monopoly money."

My fingers strained against the triggers, and rage burst out of the top of my head like a furious, flaming bird. And then I was left, a vibrating mass barely holding the gun. I looked into her eyes, and knew something more was going on than what was happening on the surface. I said, "You want me to do this. You're making me do this."

She shook her head at me. "Do you see our outcome, at least? I mean here, the outcome of this? It comes to killing me, too?"

Who was me? The end of the gun quivered visibly. For some reason I thought of my father-in-law, on a distant plane, on Laura's plane. He'd died there from natural causes. There, at least. I sensed acutely the dried blood splattered across the end of my gun. Then I tried to look deeper into her eyes. They were brown, radically different from those of my other wives in my other lifetimes. Or maybe not. Maybe not radically.

"Now," she was saying. Tears were streaming down her face. "Don't you see, that our marriage needs this now, this moment?"

I looked at her bewildered, startled, awed. I said, "He gave you one, too? The implant — "

"And why not? Do you think he believed in some sort of macho double standard? Do you think he would have been so supportive of us and not believed in marriage?"

"But, I — "

"Do you know how hard I have worked to save our marriage?" She was crying, really crying, and I was, too.

"But, Laura," I couldn't help the tears; I wasn't even sure why. "Laura, what are you saying — "

"Do you know how hard it was to find you in those other places? In all these five worlds?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I couldn't bear what she was telling me. I couldn't take it. With the stupid, awesome, shaking sobs running through my body, cracking the shell so that the vulnerable softness inside me could again meet the softness inside her, I touched the implant just below the skin and was gone again.

Red. I had not been here for some time. It was the first of the four lifetimes I'd visited beyond the real one with Laura, the first persona I'd created, and the first to bore me, with deathly boredom. In the world of this city, other users walked by — users who would be strangers to me on any other frequency, in any other world. A lot of strangers used the technology, shifting worlds, living multiple lives simultaneously on different planes, interacting in fantasies that were all too real. Strangers: but maybe they weren't all strangers.

I went to Becky's house. The proverbial red light was on outside, illuminating a weathered peacock on the sign that said simply, "Becky's." I'd been such a juvenile in these daydream worlds, in the marriages I felt I needed and wanted. I couldn't believe now that I'd married a madame, or that at one time I'd found purely physical lust to be a good reason to do it. What the hell: it was just fantasy, right?

Becky no longer did tricks, so that was cool. She just did me; my persona in this world lived with her on the top floor of the brothel, and lived off the fruits of the labor of her girls. Had she sensed the absence of my consciousness at all? I doubted it. Most of us walk around only semi-conscious anyway; no one seems too upset about it. I doubted she cared.

Now as I walked into the house, past the girls in the lobby, I wanted her again. The "I" in me wanted her, her breast-flesh, the comfort of her scarlet womb-like room and the warm embrace, the smell of deodorant under her slightly thick arms, the moisture of her thighs. I wanted her.

I found myself in her room. She was writing bills at a little Queen Anne desk. The room was scarlet. It smelled of her body, and of my own sweat.

"How's things, Tom?" she said. Her voice was gentle, motherly. I couldn't believe how I'd seen her as through and through a simple mass of flesh, an object to pound into, something to use. "Are you all right?"

A gentle voice! The tears streamed down my face. "Laura," I said. And she, too, began to cry.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"He was a wise old fellow," she said. She'd turned again to the window. Only now her stance was not like stone. A full light came into the study. I saw her hair for the first time in years, how it sparkled with many colors in the light, and how tender it seemed, curling and falling onto her shoulders. I saw her in color, and not in the grays with which I'd imaged her for virtually the whole of our marriage; I saw the ripe fullness of her, the red, blue, green, yellow and beautiful white in her robes and hair and lips and skin and eyes. They weren't so old and tired after all.

I couldn't respond to what she said. I didn't understand it. I was afraid I would cry if I said anything at all.

She answered my silence. "Dad: he knew what marriage was like, you know, what men and women can be like. And he knew how much I loved you, how many years and how much I was willing to invest to make our marriage work, to help you be here fully, with me. You asked a few moments ago if it was a conspiracy. Don't you think — " She nearly choked with the gentle knots of the emotions. "Don't you think a bride consults with her father about the future of a union? And when he loves her, don't you think he senses how much she loves the new man — and that a father makes a kind of commitment to sacrifice himself if necessary for the things for which she would sacrifice herself?"

"I— " I couldn't speak. The vibrating feelings were too deep for words: I'd been like a shallow pool at the top of a reef that opens below the crusted coral into startling depth, soft depth where two people could really meet. Amazing that it took ten years sometimes for a marriage to begin to work, for a man to become whole for just a moment.

She turned. I stood and was with her. The soft parts inside us met again, and did not curl back into harsh shells. They were open and vibrated with warmth and tears and the pulse of life. I felt new. And I saw into her eyes again, as if she lifted a bridal veil; I saw the old man's wedding gift, and his daughter's sacrifice and in the depths of those eyes, a sparkling, clear luminosity.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

*Eight years ago, Nancy Etchemendy introduced us to the Nevada desert town of Pactolus in "Shore Leave Blacks" (March 1990). That tale, you may recall, was near-future science fiction. Now she revisits the terrain with a fantasy of an altogether different sort, a story of love and truth, and of the things we want (or need) to believe.*

# Double Silver Truth

## *By Nancy Etchemendy*

TRUTH SANDRESEN AND I grew up together here in Pactolus, which is, by itself, enough to explain why I wonder what might make a person's soul linger after death. Things happen in this town that can't be explained.

You probably have not heard of Pactolus unless you've studied Ovid, or have traveled the Interstate into the Nevada desert and then turned south, miles from the roads most travelers use. King Midas bathed in the River Pactolus to take away the golden touch, and its sands were said to glitter with gold ever after. Some say hopeful prospectors named our town. Others claim it was Mormons who looked down on the valley from the eastern peaks and imagined a place as rich and fertile as the banks of that legendary river.

My parents and my sister Maidie and I, Gwyn Penhallegan, lived on the south side, in a house built of round stones from the Compton River, which cuts the town in two. Within a few doors of us Basque innkeepers made their homes, as did the newspaper editor, the family who ran the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mercantile, Cornish miners like my father, and even an elderly Paiute woman who went by the unlikely name of Wuzzy Stovepipe.

I once asked Truth why the seven Sandresens lived in our neighborhood and not across the river where most of the other Mormons lived, since they were Latter Day Saints. She said she didn't know for sure, since they don't always tell the kids about these things. But she was pretty sure it had something to do with her mother seeing spirits and speaking to them. All the Mormons seemed to believe in spirits and ghosts; I loved that about them because I wanted to believe in ghosts, too. But Truth said the trick was in knowing whether her mother's visions were faith-affirming experiences, or tools of Satan, and the bishop and some of the other Brethren leaned toward tools of Satan. She wouldn't tell me more about it, no matter how often I asked, though I never forgot what she said.

As children, Truth and I spent a lot of our spare time with each other. We raised young animals together for the 4-H, learned to sew on Mrs. Sandresen's old Singer, and on days when the snow-filled wind from Mizpah howled across the flats, my mother taught us secret methods for making perfect gravy and apple pie.

In the cool of spring or autumn afternoons, we often rode double on my horse, Rojo. Our favorite destination was the Toquimas, the range of hills that lay just west and north of town like a litter of calico cats the color of minerals. Abandoned mine shafts riddled them. Our parents had forbidden us to go there, which made them all the more enticing. We haunted the weathered ruins of the Double Silver whenever we dared, for that old mine held a peculiar fascination. The shack that housed the headframe still stood, and it was filled with oddities — broken machinery, antique bottles, rusted carbide lamps and miners' hats. Moreover, twenty-seven miners had died there in an underground fire. The crumbling entry shaft was so deep that a rock dropped down it made no sound at all. But sometimes we thought we heard the ghostly cries of dead, burned miners floating up from its black maw, and we shivered and our mouths went dry as sand.

We also loved to climb the pale, puffy tufa formations on the road to Niminaa Lake. We would sit at the top and survey the land, fingers poised like scepters. There we talked about horses and mean teachers and the ribbons at Oxoby's store. Truth had dark, straight hair, while mine was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

gold and curly. Her eyes were hazel; mine were gray. She had a sprinkling of freckles across her satiny cheeks, while mine were naturally rosy. We were two royal beauties, all the more so because we did not know and did not care.

By the time we were fifteen, our tufa conversations had turned to boys and clothes and true love. That autumn, Mitch Hackbarth moved to town.

I saw him first on a blazing Indian summer afternoon, down on Center Street where I had gone after school to buy pencils and binder paper and a package of buttons for my mother. I stepped out of Oxoby's and mounted Rojo. Glossy red and nearly seventeen hands high, Rojo was a powerful and impressive animal, though moody. I had left him tied to a hitching post between parked cars; he didn't like it, and let me know by tossing his head and prancing. I had just leaned down to whisper in his ear and stroke his neck when the Hackbarths' pickup rattled past.

Mitch sat on the wheel-well in back, elbows resting on his thighs. He looked at me, astride my juggernaut gelding, and smiled and touched the brim of his hat. A kind of shock went through me, a buzz like electricity that shot from the base of my throat to the soles of my feet and left me warm and breathless.

His hair was dark, his eyes blue as a desert lake. He had his shirt sleeves rolled up, and I could see the colors of tattoos on his forearms. His body tapered down from big shoulders to a slender waist, and his hands looked strong and easy. Later, my mother would accuse me of thinking with my womanhood instead of my brain, and she was right.

The next day, I saw him at school. Compton Unified High had maybe two hundred students altogether, drawing not only from Pactolus but from all the ranches and mining camps in the vicinity. I was a sophomore, and Mitch had enrolled as a senior, so we had no classes together. But he found Truth and me in the hallway as we put our books away before lunch.

He took his hat off and flashed me the same delectable smile I had seen the day before. His hair was the color of bittersweet chocolate, and curly. Close up, I could see his tattoos more clearly, and they were like none I had ever imagined. On his right arm, a wild mustang reared from

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wrist to elbow; on his left swirled a fiery rope. He smelled like leather and alfalfa hay. I felt nailed to the floor.

He nodded at Truth, and I watched for a panicky instant as something passed between them, hard to describe and ever so brief, a keen attention that made me wonder which of us he had come looking for. Then it was over and his blue gaze focused on me again.

"Excuse me. I saw you downtown yesterday," he said. "That's quite a horse you've got. I just thought, well, I wondered if...could we eat lunch together today?"

I felt light enough to float off the floor.

"Oh!" I croaked. "I mean, yes, I'd like that, to eat with you I mean. I usually eat with Truth and some of my other friends, but maybe..." And here I elbowed Truth none too gently.

"Uh," she said, as if coming up from far underwater. "I'll see you after school, Gwyn." She hurried away, but not without a backward glance, returned by a strange, small smile from Mitch. It bothered me at the time, like a tiny ragged edge on a fingernail, but after a while it wore down and I forgot about it. Who *wouldn't* give Mitch a backward glance?

I took him out to the south side, where we found a bench beneath the butter-yellow leaves of a cottonwood. I had a brown bag lunch. His was packed in a wicker box, which seemed larger inside than out. From it he produced two roast beef sandwiches, pickles, three hard-boiled eggs, a thick slice of cake and a quart of milk. He ate it all. I noted with sly satisfaction that the cake was chocolate, a food forbidden to Mormons, which meant he wasn't one of them, or was at most jack-Mormon, and therefore, possibly, was off-limits to Truth and a good many of the other girls.

At first we talked about Rojo. Mitch had only glimpsed him, yet he described the horse as if he'd hand-raised him. He accurately guessed Rojo's age, his temperament, his appetites. I told him a little about myself, embarrassed. Born in Pactolus, lived all my life in Pactolus, probably destined to die in Pactolus. I had traveled to Mizpah a dozen times, and once to the city of Bishop. But everything else I knew was limited to what could be learned between the Desatoyas and the Toquimas, which didn't seem like much at the time.

Mitch came from Reno. His father was a pit boss at Harrah's Casino, a place so legendary that even I had heard of it. He was the oldest of four

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

children, and his mother had left home when he was eight, simply disappeared one night, leaving a note his father had flushed down the toilet without showing it to Mitch. The Pactolus Hackbarths were his aunt and uncle. He was here, he said, because they needed a ranch hand and because his father had made him come. He had gotten into some trouble back home, he admitted, staring off across the schoolyard to the river.

"What kind of trouble?" I asked.

"Drinking, fighting, things like that. I got in with a rough crowd. But that's Reno for you," he said, looking back at me with the smile again. His teeth were wide and beautiful, though I noticed for the first time that one of the front ones was chipped.

He took a toothpick out of his pocket and stuck it in his mouth. The way he worked it with his tongue gave me pleasant shivers in places that surprised me.

"You think you'll stay in Pactolus?" I asked, realizing in the middle of the question that anyone could guess why I was interested in knowing. "I mean, you know..." My cheeks turned hot, and I fumbled for a way to cover my mistake. "Pactolus is probably pretty boring compared to Reno."

Noticing my discomfort, he turned and looked at the river. As if speaking to himself he said, "Don't know. I had to promise to graduate high school if I came out here, and it was either come out here or do time for the county. So I'm here for a year anyway." He turned toward me again, and clapped his hat onto his head as the bell rang for the end of lunch. "Then I'd like to try my hand with the rodeo."

We walked back to the building together, and as we went inside he touched his hat brim as he had the day before and said, "Nice to meet you. Is it all right if I call you sometime?"

"Sure," I said.

And that was how it began.

Mitch had flowers shipped from a Mizpah hothouse for my birthday in October. He bought me lace handkerchiefs and a Paiute bracelet made of silver. He took me to movies at the Majestic, and he always brought me home on time. I never had to fend him off; if anything, it was the other way

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

around. Mostly we rode our horses together. I showed him every boulder and ruin and bend in the river that meant anything to me. I took him to the Double Silver, and we threw rocks down the shaft. A couple of times, we shared a shot of whisky.

Sometimes we climbed the tufa formations and sat together in a blanket, talking, talking, as autumn made its way toward winter and the magpies left for warmer climates. He told me about the lights of Reno, and how they lit up Virginia Street like a rainbow on the darkest night. He said there was a moving, lighted mural of the whole frontier on the front of one casino, and he used to dream of being the prospector in that picture, who led his horse to a stream, and bent down to put his pan in a brook and came up with gold nuggets the size of his fist. I told him my dream, too, one I'd kept secret from everyone except Truth: that someday I would leave Pactolus, and find a place where there were more important things for a woman than perfect gravy and apple pie.

After a time, my father shouted that he wanted no daughter of his seen in public with a tattooed delinquent whose main ambition in life was to ride the rodeo. He should have remembered that the Penhallegans are fond of rebellion. In my family there stand breast-to-back fifteen generations of Cornish miners, taciturn, sure of themselves as mules, and often on strike. As far as I know, it is impossible to force a Penhallegan to do anything; we have to be led around to propositions as if we were skittish livestock.

Dad might as well have thrown me into Mitch's arms and given us his blessing. By Thanksgiving, it took all the energy we had to keep from tearing our clothes off every time we got near each other. I was still a virgin, but only barely, and I struggled fiercely with myself.

It was nice, in those days long ago, to feel justified in hesitating. At the same time, it was horrible to know that I might be considered damaged goods forever if I gave in to my desires — might even be consigning myself to spinsterhood, a much greater onus then than now. I worried about half a dozen possibilities. Would Mitch still respect me? Would word get around somehow and my reputation be ruined? Most unthinkable of all, might there be a baby? For I was not sure, not sure at all, that Mitch would give up the rodeo to marry me. And there I would be with his child, trapped in Pactolus forever.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

One afternoon, I talked to Truth about it, though we had grown apart a little. Mitch was busy helping his uncle put out winter feed for the cattle. I had to call Truth ahead of time, because she had her own boyfriend, someone she'd met at church, and she was often busy, too. We took Rojo to the Double Silver, because we needed a place where we could really be alone, and that was impossible in our small houses with children stacked two or three to a room and inquisitive ears at all the keyholes.

It felt good to have Truth behind me in the saddle again, familiar and unconfusing. The wind blew cold, and sparse bits of dry snow swirled around us. By the time we reached the mine, my fingers were raw and stinging on the reins. I tethered Rojo as far out of the wind as I could in the lee of a rusted skip, a big cart that had once been used for hauling ore. He neighed and stamped his feet, incensed at this insult. He wanted to be home in his warm barn.

We ducked into the shelter of the mine shack, and huddled together on a rickety bench as far as possible from the broken window. It was still very cold. I had packed a Thermos bottle of hot cider and some slices of pumpkin bread which we spread out between us, our noses red and running. In the pocket of my sheepskin, I had hidden a pint bottle of brandy. I took it out, unscrewed the top and held it over the steaming mouth of the Thermos.

I looked over at Truth, smiled, and raised my eyebrows rather than ask the question straight out.

Truth looked genuinely horrified. "Gwyn, what're you doing? Where did you get that?"

"I found it in Dad's liquor cabinet. It's been there for years. He won't miss it."

"But we can't! We're not old enough. And I...you *know* I'm not supposed to."

Which was true. Drinking alcohol was one of the most sinful things a Mormon could do, and I was well aware of it.

"Oh, come on. Nobody will ever find out. I won't put much in, just enough to warm us up and get us talking. Haven't you ever wondered how it tastes?"

Truth shrugged and looked away, but the trace of a smile glimmered on her face. She gave me a sidelong glance. "We shouldn't do it."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

How wonderful it was to know someone as well as I knew Truth Sandresen, to know by all the little signs and subtleties what she must be thinking, and what would come next. "You're probably right. I won't do it if you don't want me to," I said, and I reached into my pocket to get the cap, knowing already that I wouldn't need it.

Truth put her hand on mine to stop me, as expected. "All right," she said. "But just a little."

So I spiked our cider with brandy, more than a little it's true, but not, I thought, enough to make us drunk by a long shot. However much it was, it surely warmed us, and it did what I hoped most. It made it easy for me to talk about a thing I was not proud of. I told Truth the whole story, how Mitch had set me afire since the first moment I'd seen him, how I'd dreamed night after night of what it would be like to have him inside me until finally I could think of nothing else.

"Have you talked about getting married?" asked Truth.

"No," I replied.

"Well, maybe you ought to."

Here, in a few concise words, Truth had gotten to the raw heart of the matter. Which was that every time I imagined being married to Mitch Hackbarth, the dreams turned to nightmares. He had no plans beyond riding the rodeo, and I had seen enough rodeo wives to know I didn't want to sit home wondering whether he'd broken his neck. He hated his mother for abandoning him, and his father for letting her go. He regularly drank too much, and had gained a reputation in town for fist-fighting and who knew what else. Did I want him enough to wed myself to that forever?

I began to cry. "I don't know if he loves me. He's never said so, anyway. I don't know whether I do either. I don't know how love feels. What if we're really in love, but we just let it slip away? How do people ever know for sure?"

Truth looked down at her boots and was silent for a moment, her face still and terrible with some feeling that I, for once, could not immediately decipher. "I think if you have to ask those questions, then it's not love, it's just the other thing, the wanting."

She looked back up at me and in an instant I thought I had solved the puzzle of her feelings, from the sound of her voice and the way she held her hands tenderly around the heat of her cider cup.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I blinked and stared. Then, with great hubris, I said, "You're in love with somebody, aren't you?"

She nodded. She should have been happy, laughing. But instead something like pain or sorrow seemed to run all through her. It frightened me, because for the first time I had come up against something about her that I didn't understand.

"Is it Michael?" I asked, flailing for a solution. Michael was the boy she'd been seeing from church, and the only candidate as far as I knew.

"No, it isn't."

"Who then?"

"I can't tell."

I laid my hand on her arm and squeezed. "You can't even tell me?"

A tear crept down from the corner of her eye. She didn't cry often. And she said, "Especially I can't tell you."

It was one of those killer revelations that hits you as if you've walked into a wall you didn't know was there. She loved Mitch Hackbarth.

Now I remembered half a dozen little things — odd pieces of conversation, and looks exchanged between the two of them. The faded memory of that first day in the hallway at school surfaced. I doubted they had actually done anything yet. Mitch was so busy with me that he never had time. And they had probably both been holding back for my sake. But when you looked for it, there it was, a force between the two of them, plain and undeniable. I felt suddenly reduced to the status of a blind, ignorant obstacle.

A terrible din began, inside my head perhaps, though at the time I thought it must be the ghosts of all those dead, maimed miners howling with devilish glee at my misfortune. The mine shack and the rotting head frame rolled giddily from side to side. I stood up and went for the door, suddenly sick to my stomach.

"Gwynny! Come back," Truth called.

Rojo stood beside the ore skip where I had tethered him. I loosened the halter lead with clumsy fingers, got my boot into the near stirrup on the second try. I realized too late that I had put more brandy in the cider than I thought, and that Rojo was in one of his moods, having no doubt brooded all that while over the distant warm barn, and how poorly treated he was, tied up in the chilly wind with no grass or water. I was halfway into the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

saddle when he threw me off with a single thrust of his huge hindquarters, and I landed messily on the skip.

I screamed a long time, as much in fear as in pain. My right femur was broken, and the bloody jagged bone stuck out through my Levi's in a way I would not have thought possible.

Rojo had bolted and was halfway down the hillside galloping for home by the time Truth reached my side. She took one look at me and ran as fast as she could toward the Blue Bottle Mine, a mile away, where my father was the foreman. They took me down to town in a Jeep, with Dad's wallet stuck between my teeth to keep me from biting my tongue. Doctor Hinkelman gave me morphine and they strapped me to a board and drove me to Mizpah, where it took six hours of surgery to put me back together again.

I LAY IN THE HOSPITAL BED in that unfamiliar town for days with nothing to distract me from my own thoughts and discomforts. I was encased in a body cast that started at my waist and extended to my toes on the right and my knee on the left. There was an oblong hole on my right thigh so the wound where the bone had come through could get air and heal faster. Sometimes it hurt like hell in that spot, and I wished I could see what it looked like, but they kept the hole covered with gauze.

The cast was white; the sheets were white; the walls were white; even the view from my window was white, for the snow that began on the day of my accident had become a blizzard. Against this background of bleak perfection, I replayed what had happened over and over in my head, wondering what I could have done to change the outcome. I could have left the brandy out of the cider. I could have brought a nosebag of oats for Rojo. I could have talked to Truth in one of the booths at Robfree's Drugstore over sodas. But all paths led to the same conclusion: that although I might have spared myself a broken bone, I could not have changed the thing that mattered most. Mitch Hackbarth and Truth were in love.

The snow had stopped all travel on the road home. My mother and Maidie and all my friends were stranded in Pactolus, waiting for a break in the weather. Worse yet, my father was stranded in Mizpah. He was angry at me not only for frequenting the hazardous environs of the Double

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Silver, which he had specifically forbidden, but also for public drunkenness, behavior which he regarded as stupid and embarrassing beyond words. To his credit, he tried to put that anger aside, and to offer me the comfort I so patently needed. I could tell he felt awkward about it. Comfort had always been my mother's domain. He held my hand in his own, roughened and twisted by miner's work. Once when I was crying, he softly recited an old nursery rhyme, which he later said he'd told me many times when I was a baby. I didn't remember it really, except in a vague and soothing way. "Lavender's blue, dilly dilly. Lavender's green. When I am King, dilly dilly, you shall be Queen."

But it was never very long before the snowy window had him grouchy and wishing he were home. Once he brought me books from the library, a thing both touching and unexpected. Though he could read quite well, he considered books unmanly, and I knew it had cost him considerable pride to be seen carrying a stack of them around Mizpah. He didn't know what to choose so the librarian chose for him, an armload of romances I couldn't bear to look at. I was at a loss to explain this, and so I hurt his feelings once again though I never wanted to.

On the eighth day, the storm was gone and the roads clear. Dad went home and fetched Mom and Maidie. The back of our pick-up truck was laden with get-well cards, including one from Truth, cookies, homemade soup, and clean underwear, not that I needed the latter, since there was no chance of getting them on over my cast. Also on that day, an arrangement of flowers came from Mitch with a card that said, "To my little rodeo rider, get well quick. I'll be down to see you just as soon as I can get away." It was signed with X's and O's.

All of which brightened my outlook a good deal. I began to think maybe I had imagined some of what went on the day of the accident. Truth had never actually *said* she loved Mitch. I was full of brandy and not thinking straight. Maybe I had jumped to an outrageous conclusion. Judging from the card and flowers, Mitch felt as affectionate toward me as ever, and the greetings from Truth, though brief, seemed warm and genuine. I started one of the library romances, and my appetite returned. But at the end of three weeks, I still had not had a visit from either Mitch or Truth, though a couple of my other friends had managed to come. And I began to feel hurt and scared about it again.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

On Christmas Eve morning, the doctor came in with a funny little saw and cut the cast off my waist, so that only a long sheath of plaster remained from hip to toe on my right leg. He uncovered the hole on my thigh, revealing an eight-inch black gash from which he removed stitches that would have looked just right on Frankenstein's monster. The sight of it made me sick, and I was glad when he put the gauze back again. The nurse helped me don my long-abandoned underwear. I could get up and walk around on crutches, and I could go home.

Everyone had done their best to make my homecoming special. Maidie braided red and green ribbons into Rojo's mane. Dad had cut a huge piñon pine, and Mom decorated it with all our old family ornaments. The steamy fragrance of Christmas cookies floated in the air, and a log fire sparkled in the hearth. The little river-stone house had never felt cozier or more inviting. And I had never felt more miserable.

Friends and well-wishers came and went all afternoon. But not Truth, and not Mitch. Mrs. Sandresen dropped by with a child in one arm and a plate of divinity in the other just before supper. Flour dusted her hair, and she smelled like cinnamon; her cheeks were rosy and I knew by looking at her that a hundred holiday tasks remained for her to finish — turkey to clean and stuff, perhaps pies or her famous pecan breakfast rolls to bake, certainly presents to wrap. She wouldn't go to bed till late, and still she made time to visit.

I smiled and accepted her good wishes and a kiss on the cheek.

"Where's Truth?" I asked. "It's been so long since I've seen her."

"Well, Gwynny..." she began. Her voice seemed to fail her, and she looked out the window, at what I do not know — the snowy hills, the snowy road, anything but the face of Gwyn Penhallegan. Finally, brushing a floury sleeve across her forehead, she looked back at me. She had eyes dark as obsidian and hair the same strong coffee color as Truth's. She was black Irish, Truth had told me once, combined some generations back with a hint of Cherokee. When she really looked at you, the effect was powerful. Now those eyes, intense as a night sky, shimmered with tears held in check.

My mother and Maidie lurked by the dining room table, straining their ears.

"Do you understand what's happened?" Mrs. Sandresen asked at last.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I suppose I looked confused, because she went on. "It's her father, not me so much." She glanced away again, this time at her hands, lying folded in her lap. "He's angry. This drinking the two of you did at the old mine. Well, that's just part of it." She stood suddenly and buttoned her coat as the crux of the matter came out in a rush. "There's this business about the boy, too, not even a member of the church. He thinks she only got to know the fellow because of you. I don't agree with it, but Truth's father is a stubborn man and he has forbidden her to see you."

How did my face look then? I'll never know. But whatever she saw there made Mrs. Sandresen smooth my hair and whisper *sorry* just before she gave my parents a small, embarrassed wave and hurried out the door.

I lay there in a daze. It had never occurred to me that perhaps I had gotten Truth into trouble with my antics. I thought of her bursting into the office at the Blue Bottle, hysterical and with liquor on her breath, and I realized for the first time just how bad it must have looked. A lot of Mormons worked at the mine. The gossip mills would have ground that up in great haste and spit it out right on the Sandresens' doorstep. Then there was the part about "the boy, not even a member of the church," for whose presence Truth's father blamed me. It had to be Mitch.

My father stood frozen, staring after Mrs. Sandresen. I could see the beginnings of red temper creeping up beyond his shirt collar, but it hadn't quite hit yet.

My mother clasped her hands and looked at me as if she might burst into tears. "Gwynny?" she said. "Is there...can I..."

It came to me that they were angry and afraid because someone had hurt me. They cared about me in a thousand ways, in blankets tucked around my chin at night, in new shoes bought instead of curtains, in forgiving my mistakes at the expense of their own pride. They cared about me a hundred times more than Mitch Hackbarth ever had, and more, it seemed to me, than Truth's father cared about her. If I gave in to my misery, I would ruin a day they had worked hard to make special. Whatever terrible things I had done, I could do this one thing to redeem myself. For the sake of my family, I could refuse to cry.

My voice shook, and I couldn't manage a smile, but I stayed dry-eyed. "I'm okay, Mom," I said.

The illumination of her face was my reward. "That's my girl."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

As my mother kissed my forehead and tucked our plaid carriage rug around my legs, my father announced gruffly that he'd better go out and get some wood. "Damn that Sandresen," I heard him mutter as he slammed the back door.

Maidie, setting the table, said, "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard of."

The air was cleared, and for the first time we could talk about all that had happened in our usual argumentative and vigorous family way. I didn't actually cry until late that night as Maidie and I lay in the dark little room we shared.

"Gwyn?" she said across the emptiness between our beds. "I saw Mitch and Truth together yesterday, riding his horse."

"You did?"

"Yeah."

"Where were they?"

"Headed up toward the hills. I dunno. Maybe they were going to the Double Silver."

"Maybe," I said. Then I hid my head in my pillow, and with that little impetus of privacy the tears came pouring. There was no reason to stop them anymore.

I GOT MY CAST OFF in the middle of January. The winter passed and the cat-colored hills grew a faint overcoat of grayish green. I began to ride Rojo again, which was a considerable help to me, for I still limped and needed a cane when walking.

By Easter, I had made a certain peace with myself about Truth and Mitch. I had to, for they had become a recognized couple at school. It would have made me crazy to enter the halls of Compton High each day if I hadn't managed at least a measure of forgiveness. Maybe "forgiveness" does not accurately describe the state at which I arrived. Some part of me felt relieved, for in spite of the fact that they walked arm-in-arm and spent long moments gazing at each other in adoring silence, they looked tormented.

That made it easier for me to remember my own hesitation about Mitch. He had told me more than once that he thought there was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

something wrong with him — something that would make his mother ditch him and run. He often arrived at school hung over. Sometimes he was covered with bruises from a reckless encounter with a half-broken horse or a fellow drunk. It was general knowledge in Pactolus that Truth's father hated him, which probably just confirmed his doubts about himself. Maybe Mitch was ashamed of the way he had treated me, too, because every time he saw me he pretended that he hadn't.

In spite of all that had happened, or maybe because of it, I could not stop thinking of Truth as my best friend. I felt as if I had swallowed a rock every time I glimpsed her weary face, her eyes dull with the burden of her father's anger and the frightening prospect of her own future. She was trapped, for there is no denying true love, even if it is clearly a harbinger of terrible events to come.

The month of May arrived, and as usual, it distracted and soothed me away from all else, for May is a magical time in Pactolus. The world tilts just so, winter loses its hold, and summer arrives. It happens suddenly. The first half of May is often cool, even frosty. Then one morning you wake up, and the air brims over with quail and magpie song. Yellow rabbitbrush illuminates the hills, and sun pours down from heaven like the gold of old Midas himself. People roll up their sleeves and kick off their shoes. The air smells wet and fertile. The lilacs and the forsythia bloom, and even the orneriest miners wear bright sprigs of it in their hatbands. Men, women, and children pick up hammers, pack lunches, and spend a Saturday on Center Street repairing the wooden sidewalks. Oxoby's Mercantile supplies the nails and Robfree's donates bottomless buckets of lemonade. It made me throw my cane away and almost forget the bitter winter and all that had come with it.

Mitch was due to graduate with the rest of the seniors at the end of the month. I suppose, somewhere under the dizzy joy of the season, part of me realized that the clock was ticking for Truth. Mitch was only obliged to stay in Pactolus till he'd finished school, so something big had to happen. Either he would make good on his plans for the rodeo, or he would stay and thereby make a commitment to Truth.

This time of year, my family spent most evenings together on the porch. Mom and Dad would wander out to the swing after supper, and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

when Maidie and I had finished washing the dishes, we usually joined them. We often found Mom sipping a glass of iced tea, and Dad sucking on his pipe. Sometimes Maidie would get out her guitar and softly sing ballads or bits of the Gilbert and Sullivan songs Dad was so fond of. The warmth of the desert day lingered as frogs and crickets joined Maidie. And the air floated like lavender silk, the smells of lilacs and tobacco mingling with sagebrush.

One such evening in the third week of May, the sound of a quarrel came from the Sandresens' house. The Sandresens didn't live next to us, but across the street and down a door. It was not the kind of polite disagreement you might overhear while walking past an open window. It was a great deal louder than that. The voice, as full of rage as any I have ever heard, belonged to Truth's father.

"You're no better than a common whore, a common whore, my own daughter! You belong out on the Mizpah road in the whore house," was the indictment that split the warm, dry night.

Someone responded in a voice no less furious, but smaller and unintelligible from our distance.

"How could you do such a thing to me? A God-fearing man! I've raised you right, did everything, everything for you. And now you do this!"

And the reply, "Daddy...not fair..."

"Get out of this house! Get out!" Mr. Sandresen's voice seemed barely human. It was an animal roar of rage.

"....please, Daddy..." The small voice belonged to Truth.

Than a long, horrible howl, "*Get out!*"

This was swiftly followed by a smack, a thud, and a yelp of pain.

It was rage and indignation of a different order than Mr. Sandresen's that brought me to my feet then. No one had the right to treat another person that way, especially if the person were Truth.

I pounded raggedly down the steps and into the street. I couldn't walk without limping yet, and could only run with painful awkwardness. I heard the determined thump of my father's boots behind me. "Gwynny, don't hurt your leg," he called.

Other neighbors had come from their porches to stand on the sidewalk in front of Sandresens'. I wove and darted among them. By this time,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I had it in mind to hurl myself through the screen door if need be to keep the bastard from hitting Truth again. But I didn't have to, because at that point she stumbled out onto the lawn with her hands over her face. I could not tell whether she hid tears alone or blood as well.

We hugged each other there in the sweet-smelling night. "Oh, Gwyn, he hit me," she sobbed.

"I know," I said, guiding her down into the street. "Come on. You can come to my house."

"I'm ashamed."

"We can go in the barn. Nobody'll bother us. Come on." I led her away, trying to stay in the shadows as far as possible from the neighbors who stood in small fidgety knots and whispered as we passed.

Whenever I went inside the barn, I remembered anew why Rojo loved it so. It had a close, comforting feel to it. Fragrant hay, oats, Hooflex, and saddle soap abided there, and the smell of the horse himself. The barn was safe, and the body sensed it. No better place was ever made for healing a wounded spirit.

Truth and I sat in the dark on a bale of hay, looking out through the big doors at the extravagant spangles of the desert sky. She wouldn't let me turn the light on, but she did tell me her eye was swollen and she thought her nose was bleeding. I found a cloth and wet it at the spigot by the trough, and after a time my mother knocked and discreetly handed me a towel with ice wrapped in it.

I got Truth to the point where she could laugh a little about looking like a prize fighter. It wasn't hard, because I think she wanted to laugh, needed to somehow. And for a while we talked all around what was really on our minds. There was a certain relief and joy in just being together after all those months of enforced separation, no matter what the circumstances.

Finally I asked her what had happened.

"He wanted to know if I'd been sleeping with Mitch." She shivered as she said this. "I've never lied to him. I told the truth, and so..." She began to cry again. "So he hit me."

"It was a stupid thing to do," I said.

"Everybody thinks it was a stupid thing to do," Truth replied. "I'm just what my father said. It's true. I'm a no-good whore."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It took me a second or two to figure out what was going on. She thought I had accused her of stupidity for sleeping with Mitch.

I confess that I had a moment's trouble sorting out my own reaction, because in fact it felt good to hear her admit she'd been wrong to take Mitch from me. Then the facts of the matter sobered me, and I realized I wouldn't trade places with her for anything. Mitch and trouble were a package deal.

I took her by the shoulders. "You don't understand!" I said. "I meant hitting you was a stupid thing for your dad to do. Stop thinking that way! You're not the only girl who's ever been entranced by Mitch, you know. Believe me, if it weren't for what happened at the Double Silver last fall, I'd be the one sitting here with a bloody nose and a crazy father. Sleeping with Mitch is no stupider than a flash flood. It's just nature. Some things you can't do anything about."

There it was. I had finally forgiven her through and through, and I knew my reasons were good. There, but for the grace of Truth herself, went I. She had dropped the ice towel in her lap, and feeling protective, I stuck it back in her hand and pressed it to her face. "Come on. Better keep that eye cold," I said.

Instead she turned and hugged me hard. "I *am* stupid," she murmured. "I'm pregnant."

THERE WERE NO LEGAL abortions to be had anywhere north of Mexico in those days. If we had lived in Reno or Las Vegas, Truth might have had a chance of arranging one anyway. But not in Pactolus; not even in Mizpah, or so we thought. It wasn't until years later that I found out Wuzzy Stovepipe had provided this service for the town's women as far back as anyone could remember. If we had walked to the end of our own street, the old Paiute could have solved Truth's problem. But this we didn't know. I'm not sure Truth would have gone through with it anyway. I think she was already as much in love with the baby as she was with Mitch.

We stayed up half the night trying to figure out what to do. It was one of those situations where every road seems to lead up a sheer cliff. There were no good or easy answers. Long after midnight, I tried to convince

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Truth that a bed on our couch was the best temporary medicine. But she was too embarrassed to risk being seen. So we burrowed into a pile of straw there in the barn and fell asleep.

I remember every single thing about the next day, and I suppose I always will. It's like a wicked little jewel, perfect even after all these years, every edge still hard and sharp enough to draw blood.

I awoke at dawn, eyes gritty from the straw. There wasn't a cloud in the whole violet sky. A band of beautiful peach-colored light brightened the eastern horizon. A meadowlark sang lustily in a field somewhere nearby. Truth was gone.

It was a school day, and I wasn't sure what to do. I went for a walk down by the Sandresens' house, but no lights appeared in the windows, and everything was still. So I went back home, took a bath, and got dressed for school. I remember each little detail. I wore a blue denim skirt and a white blouse with blue piping and pearl buttons. My mother fixed scrambled eggs and raisin muffins for breakfast. I had to tell her and Dad and Maidie all about the previous night. I made up a bunch of lies. I said I thought Truth had gone home and maybe things would be all right. I didn't say anything at all about her being pregnant. All the while, my stomach twisted like a snake caught under a boot heel.

Truth didn't show up for our first period English class, but a big black crow did, and he sat boldly on the windowsill for five minutes before the boys shooed him away. Something about that crow made my heart do sick little flips. His eyes were hard and golden, and he looked like a messenger from hell. I started to cry, and Katherine Hutchins had to escort me to the nurse's office.

At lunch time, having convinced the nurse I was just suffering from lack of sleep, I searched for Truth. Nobody had seen either her or Mitch. I was frantic by then. I considered phoning Truth's mother from the pay booth on the corner by the poplar windbreak, but decided against it, afraid that if Truth weren't there my call would just get her into further trouble.

After lunch, I slept through algebra and got two demerits for it from Mr. Gardella. It seemed as if the school day would last forever, but it did eventually end. By three o'clock, the temperature hung at 95°. Pactolus was a child's paint box of wilted colors. Everywhere spring blossoms

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

struggled against the sudden summery heat and confused trees sprang into full leaf. I lugged an armload of books down Center Street, across the bridge toward home. I had just passed Esubio's, from the dark interior of which came the jingle of slot machines and the cool tinkle of ice in drinks, when Maidie came running up.

Excitement made her even more breathless than she would otherwise have been. "They've found Mitch's horse, all saddled up and running loose. Nobody knows where he is, or Truth either. They're organizing a search at the city hall. They think the horse might have thrown them, out in the brush somewhere."

"Where did they find the horse?"

"In the hills west of town is all I know," said Maidie.

West of town rose the cat-colored Toquimas, and the wobbly head-frame of the Double Silver. I thought I knew where to look first. "Damn it, Maidie! Why didn't you bring Rojo?"

"Don't blame me! Dad's got him, out with the other searchers."

Maidie took half my books and we ran for home. Though my bad leg slowed me to a walk long before we got there, my mind raced like a rabbit. What were the chances of two people getting thrown from a horse and both of them ending up hurt too much to go for help? Slim, in my experience. And in any case, what would either Mitch or Truth be doing at the Double Silver in the middle of a school day? Something about the "thrown by a horse" theory didn't add up. With every step, I got more shivery inside.

There was nothing to do but wait, so Mom and Maidie and I did just that. I changed into jeans on the off chance that I might have to ride somewhere fast. I shelled peas for Mom. And all over the house, clocks ticked. At 6:30, we sat down to supper without Dad. I could tell from the condition of Mom's forehead that she was both worried and annoyed, but she did what she could to hide it. The meatloaf was probably pretty good, but it tasted like sand to me and I had a hard time choking it down. Before I had gotten halfway through my slice, we heard a ruckus outside.

Mrs. Sandresen was staggering down the street, bawling and screaming. She had hold of her hair with both hands and was yanking on it as she walked. Mr. Sandresen scrambled backward in front of her, his arms out, pleading with her. "Stop it, Caroline, for God's sake! Please!"

Maybe Mrs. Sandresen's body was there, but her mind was some-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

where else, in a place so far away that she neither saw nor heard her husband. She kept saying over and over, "Truthy's dead. She came to me. She's dead, and in pain."

My mother ran down the steps to see what she could do. I heard her ask Mr. Sandresen, "Has there been word from the searchers?"

He shook his head in a bewildered way and held himself stiff with fear.

Mom went straight up to Mrs. Sandresen and hugged her. After a moment's confused struggle, Truth's mother returned the hug. There they stood, two middle-aged ladies, one sobbing as if every breath hurt and the other comforting her as she would a child. "Hush now, Caroline. There's no reason to think that. I'm sure Truth's fine. They'll find her. You'll see."

"No," sobbed Mrs. Sandresen. "You don't understand. She's dead. I saw her. She told me herself."

Which didn't make one hell of a lot of sense till I remembered the old question I used to ask Truth. "Why don't you live across the river?" And the mysterious answer: "It has to do with my mother seeing spirits and speaking to them."

As I watched the scene in the street, the rational part of me thought, *Poor woman, she's always been a little crazy, and this has pushed her over the edge.* The not-so-rational part made me run to the barn in tears. Because it knew, in some way that had nothing to do with reasons, that Truth's mother might well be right.

IF YOU'VE NEVER LIVED in the desert, it's hard to believe how fast the temperature can drop once the sun has been gone awhile. Dad came home late, hungry and chilled, to find me on the porch wrapped up in a blanket.

"Did you find them? Did you search the Double Silver?" I asked.

"Sorry, Gwyn. We looked everywhere. There's just no sign of them. We called the search off." He sat on the steps and tugged at his boots. When he finished, he came over and squeezed my shoulders. "You should be in bed now. Come on. They'll probably find 'em in some wedding chapel in Reno."

I tried to take cheer from this thought, but I couldn't. As I sat there listening to the frogs and crickets, I heard coyotes yipping and howling in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the distance, and it gave me the shakes. After a while, I did go to bed. But I never managed to fall asleep. At least, I don't think I did, and I don't think what happened toward dawn was a dream.

I had given up on sleeping, and wandered out to the porch again. Even a beautiful night can be a terrible time. The moon was nearly full, hanging high and bright. Nevertheless, there were so many stars that it looked as if Earth had suddenly gone to heaven. The ground still held enough spring moisture to produce a little dew, and it made everything smell clean — the sagebrush, the lilacs, even the dirt. There were no human noises anywhere. I could even hear the river tumbling along its path a long ways away.

My leg ached in the old broken spot, and I stood up and turned around to ease it. I sat down and got comfortable again, and when I looked up Truth and Mitch were climbing the steps. I threw the blanket off and leaped out of the porch swing.

"Truth! God, I've been so worried. Where were you all this time?" I ran up and hugged her.

Only I didn't really; I couldn't.

I have thought about this often in all the years gone by. I have worried it as a dog does a bone. Was it a dream, or did it really happen? There are points in favor of both possibilities. Like the rest of that day, it is still as vivid as ever in my mind. I ran to Truth and I tried to hug her. I felt only a faint heat, a little pull that made the hair on my arms stand up. Though I knew she was there, I went right through her. I drew back and squinted. Moonlight flooded the porch, but every shadow was deep and black. Mitch took his hat off, scooped the hair back from his forehead, and put the hat on again. His familiar scent of alfalfa and leather mingled with the other smells of the beautiful night. He put his arm around Truth, and she put hers around him. It came to me that I could see the stars through them, twinkling fiercely. The shock of it swarmed up my spine like red ants.

"We need your help, Gwyn," said Truth. There were no echoes, no wavering moans, nothing like you read in scary books. It was just Truth's voice, the same as ever. I could even hear her breathing.

"Anything," I said. "Anything at all."

"We're down in the Double Silver," said Mitch.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I couldn't move. I could barely swallow. This was the thing I had feared all day, and now Mitch had given it voice. "I don't want this to be happening," I said.

Truth held her hand out toward me. "I'm sorry, Gwynny."

I couldn't speak. My throat felt like a stick of hot wood.

"We had to do it," said Mitch. "Don't you see? There was no other way we could be together."

I thought Mitch was right at the time, because in a way I was just like him. I was young. Given a choice between their dying and their living together, even a stubborn fool like Truth's father would have softened as surely as hardpan in rain. But none of us had been alive long enough to know that.

They looked so sad as they stood there on the porch with their arms entwined. Was this how they had stood in the moment before they stepped over the dark threshold of the Double Silver shaft?

I scrubbed at my eyes, but the tears came anyway. I could barely see. "I already tried to help!" I cried. "And look what happened. I can't seem to do anything except make things worse!"

Mitch's blue lake eyes fixed on mine and he said, "It wasn't your fault, Gwyn. You were the best friend we had. Will you remember that?"

"I don't know. I'll try," I said, half angry at him for even suggesting that I could assuage myself of responsibility for the part I played in their deaths. But I did remember. It wasn't until a long time later that I realized what a gift those words of Mitch's were.

It might have been my imagination, but I thought he and Truth smiled gently then, as if a certain dread had lifted from them. "Would you tell my mother to remember it, too?" said Truth.

I blinked and they were gone, even more suddenly than they had arrived. The porch was empty except for the light of the moon and the lingering smells of leather and alfalfa.

They didn't ask to be buried, but neither Truth's mother nor I could rest until that piece of business was finished. And what a business it was. We had no evidence at all that Truth and Mitch had fallen down the Double Silver. We could offer no scuff marks or suicide notes, no incriminating scraps of cloth, no testimony from individuals who had seen them

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in the area. If there were ever footprints, they must have been obliterated by the first group of searchers. As might be expected, nobody volunteered to be lowered down a crumbling nine-hundred-foot hole in the ground where twenty-seven men had once died. Everyone wanted good reasons, and our reasons were too easily written off as the product of hysterical grief.

In the end, it was my father who came to the rescue. After a week of finding me sleepless on the porch at dawn, he gathered a group of other miners from the Blue Bottle and they rigged up a winch with a man-skip on a cable. Dad climbed in with a big battery-powered lamp and they lowered him down that gaping black throat while he softly hummed a tune from *H.M.S. Pinafore.*

He did indeed find Truth and Mitch. They had fallen together, and lay as if sleeping with their arms around each other, very much as I had seen them in the moonlight. They lie beside each other still, in the Pactolus cemetery on a little rise above town.

I left Pactolus for a time when I got old enough, though I returned for good some years ago. I married a boy from Elko, and we bought a ranch here, on the road to Niminaa Lake. The pull of this town is strong almost beyond reason.

I got to see firsthand that moving, lighted mural in Reno Mitch told me about — the one with the jubilant settlers and the miners whose pans held huge nuggets of gold. It surprised me to find that it looked very much like a picture of Pactolus. I have children of my own now, and it scares me to remember what happened to Truth and Mitch. There's always that fear that such a thing might befall a child of mine, in spite of all my love, and all my best efforts.

Now and then on a moonlit night in May, I step onto our porch, wondering if I'll find them climbing the steps. There are times when I want to hear Mitch say once more, "It wasn't your fault, Gwyn. Will you remember that?" and to see him and Truth smiling as I promise that I *will* remember.

There are times when I very much need to believe in ghosts.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

# Fantasy&ScienceFiction
# MARKET PLACE

## BOOKS-MAGAZINES

S-F FANTASY MAGAZINES, BOOKS. 96 page Catalog $5.00. Collections purchased (large or small). Robert Madle, 4406 Bestor Dr., Rockville, MD 20853.

SEND 50¢ FOR CATALOG of Scientifantasy books & Pulps. Canford, Drawer 216, Freeville, NY 13068.

FREE CATALOG of science fiction pulps, paperbacks, hardcovers. Collections also purchased. Bowman, Box 167, Carmel, IN 46032.

FANTAZINE monthly magazine of serial fantasy art and literature. For current issue, send $3.00 ($5.00 foreign) to: FANTAZINE, PO Box 304, Logan, UT 84323.

WRITE FOR MY LISTS of hardcovers, paperbacks. Hasbrouck, 12103 Pacific #4, Los Angeles, CA 90066.

BACK ISSUES OF F&SF: Including some collector's items, such as the special Stephen King issue. Limited quantities of many issues going back to 1990 are available. Send for free list: F&SF, 143 Cream Hill Rd., West Cornwall, CT 06796.

## MISCELLANEOUS

MANUSCRIPTS WANTED. Subsidy Publisher with 75-year tradition. Call 1-800-695-9599.

AGENT looking for new authors, send sase to: Jan, GEM Literary, 4717 Poe Rd., Medina, OH 44256.

ARMADILLO CARTOONS of Zeno math, science, futuristic frames, doll pattern, $9.00. Armadillo Astronomy Theory Book Shop, PO Box 164, Turner, Maine 04282.

PLASTIC MODELS: Space, Sci-Fi, tv, movies, etc. Free catalog, also buying/trading. Green's, Dept. FSF, Box 55787, Riverside, CA 92517. (909)684-5300; (800)807-4759; Fax (909)684-8819; fsf@greenmodels.com; http://www.greenmodels.com

SIGNED PRINTS OF TWO F&SF COVERS by Kent Bash: "Auschwitz Circus" (June 1996) and "Dragons of Springplace" (Feb 1997). 18" x 24" on high quality poster paper. $14.95 each (2 for $25) plus $3 post. per order. F&SF, 143 Cream Hill Rd., W. Cornwall, CT 06796.

**F&SF classifieds work because the cost is low: only $1.50 per word (minimum of 10 words). 10% discount for 6 consecutive insertions, 15% for 12. You'll reach 100,000 high-income, highly educated readers each of whom spends hundreds of dollars a year on books, magazines, games, collectibles, audio and video tapes. Send copy and remittance to: F&SF Market Place, 143 Cream Hill Road, West Cornwall, CT 06796.**

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

# CURIOSITIES

## *I Remember Lemuria* by Richard S. Shaver, 1948

IN 1943 Ray Palmer, editor of *Amazing Stories*, opened a letter from Richard Shaver, who said he was being telepathically harassed through his welder's helmet by evil beings living inside the Earth. Roll over, Doc Smith; tell Hugo Gernsback the news. Unlike the average editor, Palmer wanted to see more.

Shaver delivered, describing how, during a jail stint, he had been carried off to the inner Earth by Tero — good robots — who, for 12,000 years, had battled Dero — bad robots — for control of Earth's population. Palmer rewrote Shaver's ravings and, beginning in 1945, for over two years published the results in *Amazing*, along with Could-It-Be-True? Editorial musings, and countless outraged letters. Sales, naturally, quadrupled.

"Shaver's" initial narratives, herein, are dire even by period standards. What lends this book its unique flavor are Palmer's endless, stonefaced footnotes regarding mutative rays, stim machines (e.g. orgasmatrons), why surface women make the best sex slaves, the hazards of spelunking and the likelihood of Nazi/Dero collaboration.

Before Palmer left (or, was fired from) *Amazing*, he slipped from science-fiction's bonds long enough to found *Fate* magazine. Issue one featured Kenneth Arnold's account (Palmer-penned, I'm sure) of the flying saucers which, in 1947, he'd been the first — far from the last — to see.

For all this Palmer earns his place as my favorite black sheep in science fiction's all-inclusive family — sheep in black might be more apt, considering.

—Jack Womack

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

DR. QUARK
COUNTS HIS PIXELS, BUT NOT HIS CALORIES
Bit & Byte café
I HEAR THIS PLACE IS FIRST RATE.
How's the food?
WHO KNOWS? I'M TALKING SOFTWARE.
You have no reservation? Well, if I move this one... and that one... and these... and those...
Just follow the dancing lights to your table
WITH OUR COMPUMENU, YOU CAN SHIFT CALORIES FROM ONE DISH, OR ONE COURSE, TO ANOTHER.
AND FOR A GREAT DESSERT, JUST PRESS *.
Qu'est ce que c'est 'low-cal pecan pie'?
IT'S IN THE COMPUTER— THERE'S A WAY TO MAKE IT WITHOUT PECANS AND WITHOUT PIE.
Here you are, folks. What-you-see-is-what-you-eat.
BUT IT'S ALL IN BLACK-AND-WHITE!
That's our one drawback. Color technology is six months away.
S. Harris

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

## Science fiction for short attention spans! Hilarious competitions and cartoons from F&SF, only $9.95.

For more than 20 years, a cadre of witty readers, including famous writers like Harlan Ellison, Joe Haldeman and Pat Cadigan, has been responding to calls for bizarre items such as:

❀ Fads of the future: Shaved household pets, celebrity food fights, having your very own personal nuclear device.

❀ Near miss titles: *Slaughterhouse 5, Cattle 0; Frankenberg.*

❀ Sequels: *Candygram for Algernon, The Sheep Look Down.*

❀ Misprints caused by addition of one letter: *Whom; The Man Who Loved Mares*, and, of course, ***OI, ROBOT***, which is the title of the long awaited book collection of more than 50 of these startling items, including bawdy limericks, Feghoots, worst story openings, 50-Word Mini Sagas and more.

They are accompanied by more than 30 wonderful drawings from F&SF cartoonists, including Sidney Harris, Henry Martin, John Jonik and Joe Farris.

Copies are still available of a limited edition, printed on quality paper and signed by the editor. 176 pages.

---

Send me __ copies of the limited edition of *OI, ROBOT, Competitions and cartoons from F&SF*, edited by Edward L. Ferman. I enclose $9.95 each, which includes postage and handling.

Name_____

Address_____

City/St/Zip_____

❑ Charge my MC/Visa

Acct No._____

Exp date_____

**Fantasy & Science Fiction**

**143 Cream Hill, W. Cornwall, CT 06796**

**Fax (credit card orders) 860-672-2643**

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED